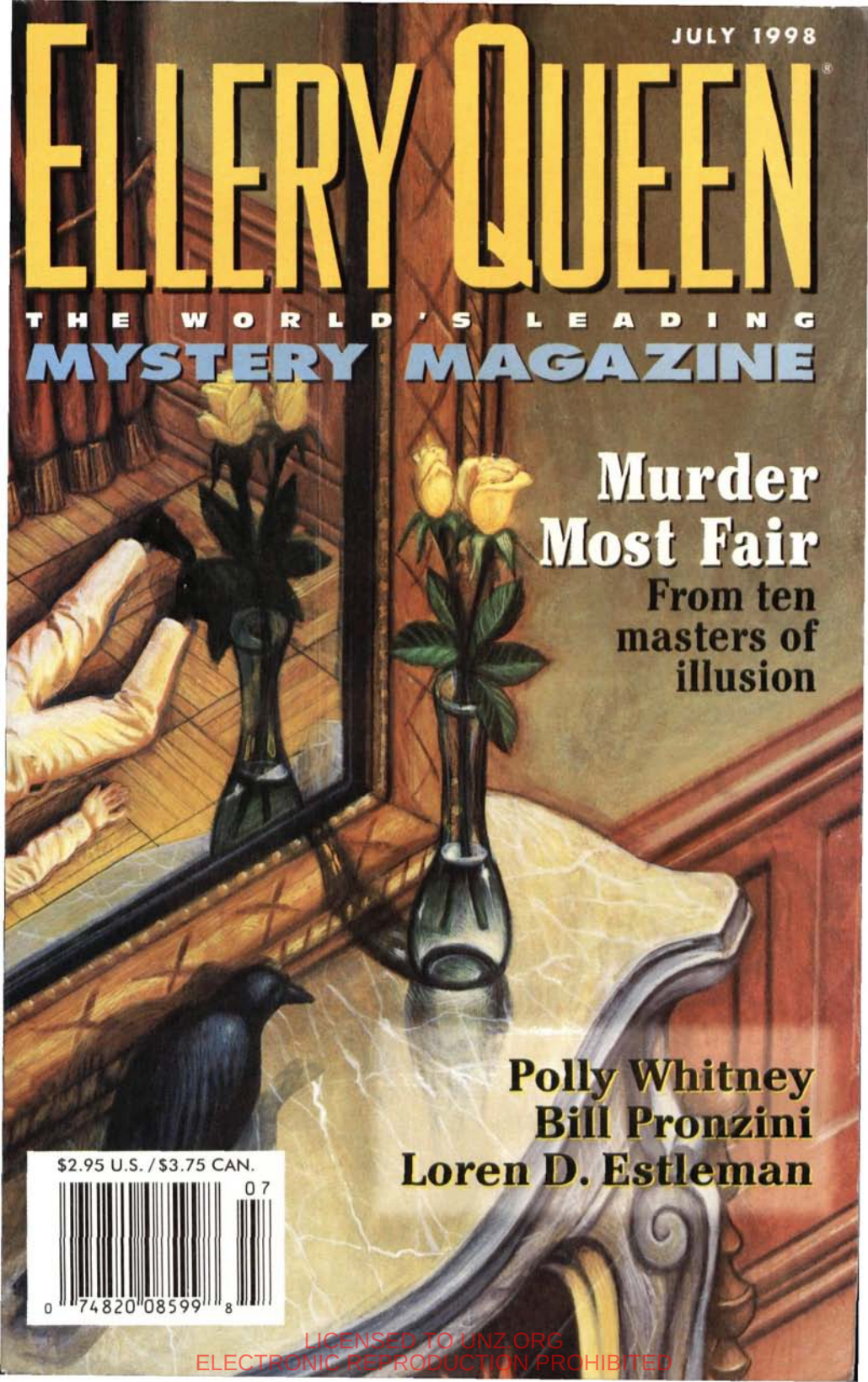
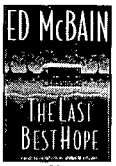
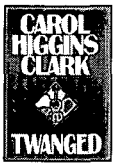


LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

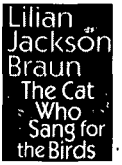


5637*
$24.00/**$11.98**



0232
$22.00/**$11.98**

5504
$23.95/**$11.98**



1271
$22.95/**$12.48**

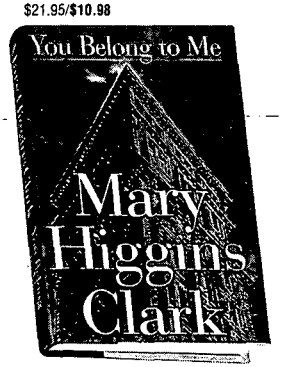
5751
$22.00/**$10.98**

5769
$22.95/**$11.48**

5777
$21.95/**$10.98**

Steal a look at the best

And join the *Mystery Guild* for the hottest titles at criminally low prices!

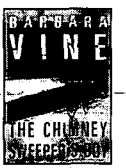


4788 $25.00/**$13.48**

5785
$23.00/**$11.48**

3640
$21.95/**$10.98**

3335
$23.00/**$11.48**



5678
$24.00/**$11.98**

5728
$22.00/**$10.98**

5686
$23.00/**$11.48**

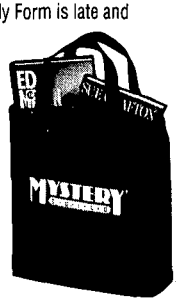
5736
$19.95/**$9.98**

5710
$19.95/**$9.48**

SEVEN REASONS TO JOIN NOW...

1. Joining is easy. Just choose 6 books for 99¢. Your bill (including shipping and handling) will come when membership is confirmed. We'll also send you the **FREE** *Mystery Guild* Tote Bag. **2. Your satisfaction is guaranteed.** If you're not happy with your books, return them within 10 days *at our expense.* Your membership will be canceled; you'll owe nothing. The FREE Tote is yours to keep as our "thank you" for trying us. **3. Save up to 60%** off publishers' edition prices. Just pick at least 4 more books at our regular low prices during your membership. Take up to 2 years! Then you may resign membership any time. **4. Extra bonus!** Take a 7th book now for $3.99, plus shipping and handling, and reduce your membership agreement to only 3 books. Every book we offer is a full-text hardcover edition, sometimes altered in size to fit special presses.**5. A FREE Club Magazine** comes to you up to 17 times a year. Each issue reviews the Featured Book Selections plus dozens of alternate books—some are Special Club Editions you won't find anywhere else. Look for up to 2 special issues a year with super selections and more discounts. **6. Ordering is simple.** Featured Selections are sent to you automatically. To cancel—or order other books—mail in your Member Reply Form by the marked date. Shipping and handling (plus sales tax, where applicable) will be added to each order. You'll always have 10 days to decide. If your Member Reply Form is late and unwanted books arrive, please return them *at our expense.* **7. Order online.** As a member, you can also order books via our Web site **www.MysteryGuild.com.** It's a convenient way to check out our entire catalog, review selections ahead of time and order books 24 hours a day.

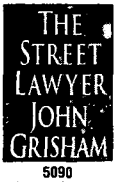
B239



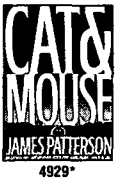
FREE TOTE
with membership

* Explicit scenes and/or language Prices in fine print are for publishers' editions.
Prices in bold print are for Club hardcover editions. All prices are current as we go to press.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

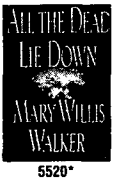


5090
$27.95/$15.98



4929*
$24.95/$12.48

5546
$22.00/$10.98



5520*
$22.95/$11.48

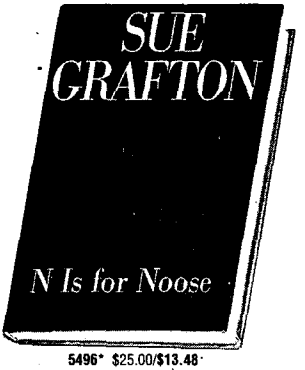
5512
$22.95/$11.48

5595
$23.00/$11.48

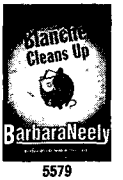
in suspense...

Take 6 mysteries for 99¢

with membership

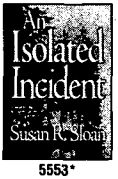


5496* $25.00/$13.48



5579
$22.95/$11.48

4267
Spec. Ed. $9.98

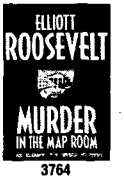


5553*
$24.00/$11.98

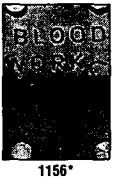
5470
$22.95/$11.48

5355
$22.95/$11.48

5363
$22.95/$11.48



3764
$21.95/$10.98



1156*
$23.95/$11.98

MYSTERY GUILD

www.MysteryGuild.com

MAIL TO: *Mystery Guild*
6550 East 30th Street
P.O. Box 6362
Indianapolis, IN 46206-6362

Please write book numbers here:

YES! Please enroll me in *Mystery Guild* according to the risk-free membership plan described in this ad. Send me the 6 BOOKS I've indicated. Bill me just 99¢, plus shipping and handling. Also, send my FREE CLUB TOTE.

SAVE EVEN MORE! Send me this book now and reduce my commitment to 3 books. Bill me an added $3.99, plus shipping and handling.

(write book number)

NU139 01

02

Mr./Mrs. _____

Miss/Ms. _____
(please print)

Address _____ Apt. _____

City _____ State _____ ZIP _____

Telephone, please (_____) _____

Members accepted in U.S.A. and Canada only. Canadian members serviced from Canada, where offer is slightly different. Sales tax added where applicable. We reserve the right to reject any application.

EQM 7/98

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

CONTENTS

Process of deduction
Page 46

Murder on holiday
Page 84

Cover Illustration
by Earl Keleny

Dell Magazines
1270 Avenue of
the Americas
New York, NY 10020

Note: indicia on
page 142

FICTION

Hard Labor Creek
BY POLLY WHITNEY 4

The Frankenstein Footage
BY LOREN D. ESTLEMAN 12

The Gentlemanly Thing
BY DAVID WILLIAMS 28

The Patients
BY SEYMOUR SHUBIN 41

If Serpents Envious
BY CLAYTON EMERY 46

The Whole Story
BY STEPHANIE KAY BENDEL 65

Wish You Weren't Here
BY MARTIN EDWARDS 84

The Liverpool Kiss
BY EDWARD D. HOCH 98

Worried Mother Job
BY BILL PRONZINI 110

Bloodbudgies and Carnivores
BY SANDRA MEYER 129

REVIEWS

The Jury Box BY JON L. BREEN 25

POETRY

Period Crime
BY REX PONTI 140

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Photo Contest — Over $150,000.00 in Prizes

International Library of Photography to award 70 prizes to amateur photographers in coming months, including $1,000.00 Grand Prize

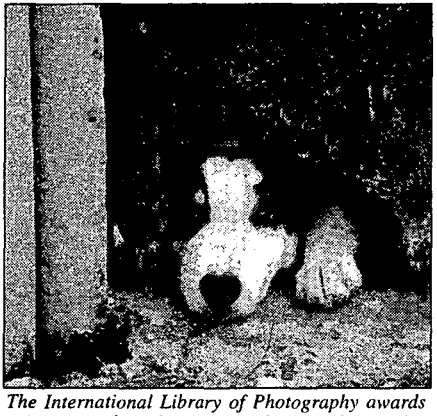
Owings Mills, Maryland — The International Library of Photography has just announced its upcoming amateur photography competition. The contest is open to everyone and entry is free.

"We're looking to identify new and emerging talent in the field of photography," stated Jeffrey Bryan of The International Library of Photography. "We have a ten-year history of awarding large cash prizes to talented amateur artists who have never before won any type of artistic contest."

The International Library of Photography was founded to recognize and promote the artistic accomplishments of amateur photographers. The libraries have awarded over $150,000.00 to talented artists in recent years.

Possible Publication

Many submitted photos will also be considered for publication by The International Library of Photography. Previous anthologies published by the organization include *A Question of Balance, The Other Side of the Mirror,* and *Wind in the Night Sky*, among others. These anthologies routinely sell out because they are truly enjoyable and are also a sought-after sourcebook for artistic talent.



The International Library of Photography awards prizes to talented amateur photographers. This Grand Prize Winner by Greg Boger of Florida, won $1,000.00 and will be seen by millions of people.

How to Enter

Anyone may enter this competition simply by sending ONLY ONE photograph in one of the following categories: People, Animals, Nature, Action, Humor, Portraiture, or Other. Your photo must be a color or black and white print (unmounted), 8" x 10" or smaller, and should be sent to:

The International Library of Photography
Suite 101-P3231
3600 Crondall Lane
Owings Mills, MD 21117

Be sure to include your name and address on the back of your photograph, as well as the category in which you wish to enter and the title of the photograph (photos cannot be returned).

"All photographers who enter will receive a response concerning their artistry," indicated Bryan. "I hope you urge your readers to enter the contest. They could be our next big winner."

© 1997 The International Library of Photography

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Art by Allen Davis

HARD LABOR CREEK

by Polly Whitney

APRIL, 1960

We were warned and warned to stay away from the river.

But Ugly Blue Man came into our lives anyway, down one of the spider-leg creeks that feed the Mississippi, and I became a secret legend.

The Mississippi went over its banks at Cranepool's Landing three times that spring. By mid April, the water was running so fast and wide that whole acres of freshly turned topsoil were sucked off the shore farms and dragged out into the middle of the river, racing in swirling black half-moons all the way down to the town of Ste. Genevieve before they sank under their own weight.

From the green "Measles Room" (so named because any illness caused our quarantine in that small olive-drab chamber) at the top of our old brick house on Lewis and Clark Hill, the brawny river seemed to throb with thousands of living pulses under its swollen skin. And the currents were so contrary, so separate from the river's other momentum, so independent, that it often looked like the fastest and straightest water out in the middle was a snake, suddenly rearing its head,

©1998 by Polly Whitney

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

swiveling around to look north and then, overwhelmed by its own rolling force, opening its wide jaws to swallow its body and choke on its tail.

We were warned and warned, but it didn't take wretched sinfulness for us to get a kid's full share of this unexpected bounty. The Mighty Muddy Crud, and the reeking corpses of animals caught in its spate, had already pushed across the bottomlands to become part of us. Without going anywhere near the river, we found ourselves standing in its wash and surrounded by its heavy strength.

In the town of Cranepool's Landing, the old river valley farming rhythms still wrote our calendars, but that April the brutal rush of the river over its banks muscled us out of familiar patterns, delayed the planting, closed businesses, and reshaped the land, giving us new reference points and ways to log who we were and where we came from and where we might be going.

Because the water was so cold and full of grisly, squishy things, we played what we called "Noah's Softball" in our red rubber boots on the old Jefferson Barracks parade ground, with a set of crudely negotiated but ironclad new flood rules. We had banned the use of gloves because the object was not golden-glove fielding but rather hurting and humiliating each other. Only the real power hitters ever got on base, because (1) any ball hit into the shallow new lake covering the field sank and was ruled dead, and (2) the count on the batter was frozen while the ball was found and squeezed out. (3) The rare base runner was automatically out if he touched the floating base first with his foot because headfirst sliding was mandatory. Indeed, it would have been strangely lax of our ringleaders to waste such an opportunity for exploiting the gift of the river, those twelve blessed inches of stinking water standing on the parade ground at the bottom of Lewis and Clark Hill.

The flood wash was such a powerful new strategic element in our games that the army engineers from Jefferson Barracks fort sometimes came out to watch us play ball in it. The headfirst-sliding rule made some batters, including the occasional soldier who took a turn, think twice about putting the wood on the ball, and deliberate strikeouts became so plentiful that our pitchers got good workouts for their bean balls. There was no such thing as a foul ball (4). Anything hit in the air was fair, and (5) the fielder was allowed to call if he thought he could control the soggy incoming ball with a maximum of one drop. "Whale

Author of a series of novels for St. Martin's Press, Polly Whitney generally writes about the TV news business, a subject she has learned a lot about through her husband, who works as a producer for CBS. Ms. Whitney departs from her media theme in this new story for *EQMM*, an atmospheric coming-of-age tale with a dash of mystery. Her latest novel from St. Martin's came out in the winter of 1997. See *Until It Hurts*. ¶

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

shit," the fielder would call as he stood under the ball, holding out his hands and waiting for the splat. Outfielders, bending over and groping in the water during the inevitable lull while the cowardly end of the order was up to bat, could sling drowned squirrels and rabbits at the infield, but (6) the corpse of a muskrat scored an automatic earned run for the defense and the game was halted so we could slit the soft skin under the tail and extract the greasy musk glands. These were understood to be the exclusive property of the power hitters, who wrapped them in waxed paper for the purpose of preserving them for private experimental use whenever school reopened.

The floods produced field-architecture changes in our other games, too. The dead kids' rope had to be moved closer to the shore of the swimming hole at French's limestone quarry. The dead kids (those of us who did not know how to swim) lined up in the icy water up to our necks and held onto the rope for safety while we watched the swimmers play Jump-or-Dive Murder from the peeling sycamore trees jutting out over the limestone quarry rocks. The cobweb vault of mottled white branches, just coming into bud, hung heavily over the crystal water, and the swimmers, their flesh scratched and stung by the trees, would climb out onto the highest limbs, squeezing water and bugs from the sopping dark patches of bark as they put their hands down on the shaggy boughs. The dead kids—our teeth chattering, our skinny pelts blue, our fingers twisted around the rope—watched the swimmers launch themselves one at a time off the branches, cascades of bark-soaked water and tree scales traveling with them up into the air. The airborne swimmer attempted to suspend gravity in midair—to listen to whether the dead kids would holler "jump" or "dive"—and then twist headfirst or cannonball into the water, depending on what we dead kids decided. We would delay to the last stupefying moment of reaction time before yelling out the word, the object being to engineer as many painful bellywhoppers as possible. We never killed anyone during this game: The object was only painful mortification, and the dead kids were almost invincible that spring with the water so high and the soaked branches so low.

And school was closed. The basement of Our Lady of Lourdes Academy was full of water and the electricity was shot, so the dead kids got an early taste of freedom that spring as we were turned loose without the usual leashes and restraints of mothers and nuns and older siblings, with fierce and reiterated warnings to stay away from the river.

For me, along with this spectacular burst of freedom, there came a peculiar loneliness. Although we all took on a ducklike, uneven gait, a sort of universal lameness, as we slogged through the glutinous mud, I was actually lame, and the brace and corrective shoe I wore then under my red boots, compounded by the miracle of black sludge that had buried the streets and sidewalks of Cranepool's Landing, put me considerably behind the pack of kids trailing across the gooey landscape of the town like cold knives through chocolate frosting. After they had

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

passed me, the other kids would turn around and shout, "Hey, Taxi," but to a dead kid—who had lived much of his nine years in the shadow of two muscular sisters whose arsenal of pinching fingers and loaded vocabularies was a measure of their deep resentment at having to babysit a clubfoot younger brother sixteen hours a day—being left behind and magically alone was the biggest and most mysterious of the Mighty Muddy Crud's contributions to the town of Cranepool's Landing.

Being alone for even an hour a day was a heady experience. I had always been included in every game and activity, and surrounded by children. My sisters, both power hitters in every sense of the term, would have beaten the daylights out of anyone who tried to bar me from softball games, because my mother Edie's unchallengeable rule was that if I couldn't play, the Farrand girls—Kentucky Athena and Graceanne Regina—couldn't play.

Softball wasn't the only game in which I had a role predicated on the babysitting duties of my ferocious sisters, but my mother was kept in the dark about most of the others. I became the indispensable key to the dead kids' string of victories in Jump-or-Dive Murder (because of my sense of timing, keenly developed as a lame boy dodging his sisters' expert punches). And I was necessarily "it" in hide-and-seek: I couldn't run fast enough to hide from the other kids, so our brand of the game evolved into a superior exercise in tactics and guile. With my unmoving and monopolistic vantage point on the secret landscapes, I became an expert on all the good hiding places. And probably that was the reason I was the one who would find Ugly Blue Man and become a legend, even with a clubfoot.

To make the game more sporting that April, they handicapped my talents by creating an enormous and popular incentive for the winner. They tied me to "home" so I couldn't escape and slink away out of boredom or frustration—my torso thrust through a rotted but very high tire swing behind Tyler Rodgers's house on Lewis and Clark Hill—and made me guess where everyone was. They took turns being "Jezebel," the runner appointed to seek out the hiding places at my instruction, and the last person out won the game and the honor of untying me and rolling me down spongy Lewis and Clark Hill, past all the turn-of-the-century-tall houses that faced the river, to the parade ground. The trick for me was to outthink them, sending the Jezebel out with hideous selectivity in an effort to guess the least violent kid's hiding place last, and, to counter my growing wisdom, it was their sworn duty to make the hiding places increasingly more devious. In those measureless days, hiding in Cranepool's Landing reached new heights of invention, because rolling me to the parade ground was a loud, messy spectacle, and watching me clean sludge out of my nose and mouth was a badge of passage for the select, clever few. We called it "Rolling Pin," and it was a version of hide-and-seek that even a dead kid could win, because brawn was of no use in eluding me.

My central role as a dead kid in the spring games did not make me

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

popular, but it did make me unavoidable—except for those trips through the mud when suddenly I was alone for an hour. After I made it home alive two days in a row with only dubious supervision, my mother suddenly, and for all time to come, revised the iron rule that had bound both of my sisters to me. On that third day, Kentucky and Graceanne wouldn't get out of bed, and my mother let me out to play and said goodbye from the foot of the highly waxed hardwood stairs leading up to the bedrooms from our front parlor. Our stairs were probably the only shiny ones on the Hill that spring. Every other woman in the town had given way before the tide of dirt pouring in through every door with every child. But not Edie Farrand.

"Charlemagne Farrand," she said, a subtle elation in her pale blue eyes and her freckled hands squeezing my shoulders, "when you came along, I made a decision. I decided I would like this child, because you were so good and so quiet. Well, today I've made another decision. Today you are a man." She walked me to the door and closed it firmly behind me, and I wished she would just call me "Thumper," the way everyone else did.

Two of my mother's firmest beliefs had apparently collapsed under the prospect of entertaining me until the floods subsided:

A: Some bully would beat me to a pulp.

B: I would take off my brace and ruin my progress in turning the clubfoot.

These fundamental beliefs rested on two equally fundamental miscalculations on her part.

A: The two worst bullies in Cranepool's Landing were already exercising their license as family members to beat me silly—"whale on you, young man"—on a regular basis, leaving all other potential assailants the status of respectful but backward admirers of my sisters' originality and prowess.

B: I wanted to be NORMAL, and my brace was the palpable, dependable, objective evidence that someday I would reach that exalted plateau.

So, I knew, despite the fact that I was evidently being given blank-check authority in Cranepool's Landing to come and go without an escort, that I was not yet a man. I was still a dead kid.

Until I found Ugly Blue Man.

As I stepped across the sopping porch—even concrete was swelling with moisture that spring—I heard piggy snorts issuing from the open bathroom window upstairs. Graceanne was hanging out the window, her glasses slipping down her small nose and one of her loose blond braids dangling across her open mouth.

"That's what she said to me when I got my period, you little freak," she screamed like a hyena. "Graceanne, today you are a WOMAN." She started tossing tampons out the window. "Charlie's got his period, Charlie's got his period, Charlie's got his period." One of her projectiles,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

aimed with the strong arm and killer eye of our best shortstop, struck the side of my head. "Stick that where the frog sings, Thumper."

I knew better than to respond, because if I yelled back, my mother would know something was going on; she'd punish Graceanne, and then Graceanne would punish me. Punishments were diluted in intensity on their way down the pecking order, but their creative management increased inversely when Graceanne was involved. So I started to walk away, limping toward the little crowd already headed for the parade ground in their red boots.

"Pick up those plugs," Graceanne squeaked, emitting a thin, penetrating hiss like a steam radiator in her scream-whisper. "Are you trying to get me in more trouble, you little skunk?"

I crawled around the porch and the steps, listening for Edie and shoving damp tampons into the pockets of my overalls. The passing troop of dead kids coming past our house on the hill watched my operations curiously. Graceanne had explained tampons to me under her bed one night the previous winter, so I knew enough to be embarrassed, assuming that her graphic crayon drawings on a paper bag represented actual physiology and not a devious and cruel mind at work.

"Don't tell about them plugs," she screeched and pulled the bathroom window down.

I followed some other dead kids down from the top of the hill, and I tested the thickness of the mud by listening to the sucking and plopping sounds of my mismatched rubber boots—I had to wear two different sizes to accommodate my brace and my normal foot.

The wild surface of the river was running in silver-brown crashes and bumps, as though great boulders impeded its path, but there were no boulders this far south in the Mississippi. Whole trees were riding the water, their giant roots spinning at the center of raging eddies until they were towed down by the savage undercurrents, but even the trees couldn't tear the skin of the river, which stayed whole and strong. I saw a white-tail deer shoot past a whirling elm, over near the Illinois side. The deer's soft brown mouth was open, its antlers broken, its hooves pawing the rapids. I had to look away.

When I got to the parade ground, it was only dead kids fooling around in the water. Since that would have been a good time to get our own muskrat glands, we were all bent over with our hands in the water. A goat came floating by on its side, all chewed up by its ride down the river.

And I found a leg, over about by third base. It wasn't any goat leg. It was a man's leg and the rest of the man was with it.

I found his shirt collar and started yanking at him. I got his head out of the water and dropped him with a quick splash because his face was all blue, and his tongue was almost bitten off, half of it hanging out of his mouth, and he was so ugly I almost threw up. And on his forehead there was a bright and big reddish purple triangle mark, a wide indentation so deep that it looked like the river had let loose and walloped him with all its force with a piece of stout oak.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I knew better than to get caught with an ugly blue man, so I shouted at the other kids. We all pulled together and Ugly Blue Man came unstuck from the mud with a noise like my boots and floated on the skin of the water.

I didn't know any bottomless water except French's limestone quarry. We got the hide-and-seek rope from when they'd tied me to the tire swing at Tyler Rodgers's house, and we fastened the man's feet together and dragged him as hard as we could, all the way across the parade ground and through the mud at Our Lady of Lourdes Academy and over the lip of the playground where we could look down at the quarry. We got behind Ugly Blue Man and pushed him hard. He slid fast down the mud, down the slick slope of limestone, into the quarry lake, feetfirst with hardly any splash.

But he came up again. And then he just floated around on his back, his ugly blue face like the hub of an old bicycle wheel and his arms the broken, spiny spokes.

Since it was just us dead kids, we couldn't go out to him on our own. We all took off our boots and left them on the rocks. We untied the safety rope at one end but kept the other end knotted tight around the sycamore tree where the swimmers had made it fast. We lined up along the rope, and I got to go first.

When I was in up to my chest, leading the dead kids, and I was turning blue from the fierce grip of the stinging cold water, the other kids behind me handed over a long branch that had bugs squeezing themselves out of the bark. I remembered the fire brigade we'd watched one night when Geronimo Pinnell's house burned to the ground.

I almost went under trying to hook Ugly Blue Man. My hands were shaking from the bitterness and the reaching and the fear that I couldn't get him.

But I snagged his ankles where we'd tied him and we dragged him and ourselves back to the white edge of the quarry lake. We were all too cold to stop moving, so we quickly scrambled around for rocks, stuffing them in Ugly Blue Man's pants and his pockets and his shirt, and when he looked like a blue overstuffed scarecrow, we let him loose in the water.

He sank slowly, spinning gently until all we could see was his blue face and the purple and red triangle mark gouged on his head. And then his head went in.

We stood there shivering, watching the wobbling water where that vivid, lively triangle had disappeared, but he didn't come back up.

I suppose I must have looked like some kind of half-squashed insect as I went home, with the shivering and the jerking and my limp. And I thought I was still blue.

When I got home, I went into the sunroom, where my father was sitting in his uniform with the starch smell and the shiny medals on his pocket. He was reading the St. Louis newspaper.

He reached out and gave me a hard smack against my right ear. "You

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

little pest, Thumper," he said. "I'll whale you good for tracking all that crud into Edie's house."

I did glance down at the floor, out of a sort of habitual routine to see what I'd brought in with my limp onto Edie's floors, but I didn't care about crud or getting whacked on the head. On the front page of my father's newspaper was a photograph of a deer, perched on his skinny stick-legs on a loose rock in the middle of the foaming, tearing waters of the Mississippi just above Cranepool's Landing. Behind the deer was a pack of white water after him. And I knew he'd never make it to shore. And the deer knew it. I could see it in his eyes.

"Daddy," I said, "what's going to happen to that deer when he dies?"

I could smell the old and musty combat soldiers on my father's breath—combat soldiers were the empty brown Pabst bottles we sneaked out of the basement and filled with mud so we could see who could throw a combat soldier the farthest.

"Thumper," he said, laying down the paper open on his lap so I couldn't look at the picture of the terrified creature in the angry river, "in a place called Animal Heaven it's always nice, and that's where all the deer will go."

I didn't believe my father, but I stood up straighter because I loved him for telling me that lie, even with the combat soldier on his breath when he told it.

I could see, then, more pictures inside the newspaper on my father's lap. There was a pregnant woman sitting all by herself on the roof of a house, her stomach as big as an August watermelon under her wet white dress. Her eyes looked like the deer's. And her house was flooded up to the eaves by Hard Labor Creek as it bore down on its way to the Mississippi.

Lower on the page there was a story about prisoners escaping when the flood waters took off the gates and shut down the electricity at the state penitentiary just south of Hannibal.

That didn't seem as worrisome as the woman on the house. I looked at the picture of her more carefully. She was clutching a long-handled shovel to her. I didn't know what kind of shovel that was, only that its business end was a triangle and that she was hanging on to her shovel like it was an extra baby.

I thought maybe the pregnant woman was looking back at me from out of the picture resting on my father's legs.

Dead kids can't swim, but they have a lot of time for figuring about things after they've been told a thousand times to keep their stupid mouths shut. So I didn't tell anyone about the newspaper, about the woman on the roof and her shovel and the way its triangle looked like the one I'd seen slip into the quarry lake. I'd just have to be a legend to myself alone.

If it had been the deer with the shovel, that would have been a different story. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Frankenstein Footage

by Loren D. Estleman

Valentino fixed a drink and slumped into the glistening leather armchair he'd bought at Sotheby's. Both Humphrey Bogart and Sidney Greenstreet had sat in it in Sam Spade's apartment in *The Maltese Falcon,* and although it had since been reupholstered, the chair's new owner felt as if he drew strength and spirit from it whenever he sat there. Tonight he was low on both.

The telephone purred on the table beside the chair.

"Valentino?"

The furred, broken voice on the other end aroused his suspicions. Valentino's number was unlisted, yet hardly a week went by that some drunk didn't call and ask to borrow the camel.

"That's right," he said. "Just Valentino. Not Rudolph. No relation, and anyway, he's dead. Who's this?"

"It's Craig."

He groaned. Craig Hunter had been a popular action-movie star before changing tastes and a messy public divorce reduced him to an occasional bit on TV. He and Valentino had been friends, but lately Hunter had become a pest, calling him up at all hours, usually from some bar and invariably finishing with an appeal for a loan.

"Craig, I'm not in the mood. Viacom just outbid me for rights to a silent Buster Keaton comedy two-reeler. I was this close to closing the deal."

"That's not—"

"Don't ask me for money. I'm through subsidizing half the distilleries and bookies in the U.S."

Loren D. Estleman's first book was published in 1976. Since then he has been nominated for the Mystery Writers of America's Edgar Allan Poe Award, the National Book Award, and the Pulitzer Prize; he is also the recipient of seven national writing awards. The author currently lives in Whitmore Lake, Michigan. His "Valentino" film-detective series, to which this story belongs, is exclusive to *EQMM.*

©1998 by Loren D. Estleman

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Gimme a minute, okay? I'm in a bar in Dan Shie—I mean, in San Diego—"

"What did you do, drink up all the stock in L.A.?"

"Valentino, I need help. I'll make it worth your while."

"You know what would be worth my while, Craig? It would be worth my while if you'd stop pestering me for something you can only give yourself. Call A.A."

"Listen. Don't—"

He banged down the receiver. When the telephone purred again he lifted the handset, replaced it, then lifted it again and laid it on the table. Then he went to bed.

His business cards identified Valentino as a "film detective," a romantic indulgence. As a consultant with the film department at UCLA, he was often compelled to jet to some remote region to track down a fragment of some great motion picture long considered lost. At these times he was more Sherlock Holmes than Joe Academic, and it was this part of the work that had drawn him to it. His name, and his unfortunate resemblance to the Great Lover of the silent screen, caused him a good deal of embarrassment, but unlike much of Hollywood he refused to change his name or his appearance for mere convenience. On some rare occasions he benefited: They might lose his card, but they seldom forgot his name.

His office was a shoebox in a building that had once been part of the university's power plant, cluttered with film books and piles of video cassettes, but he had partial use of a secretary named Ruth, iron-haired old dragon that she was. She fixed him with her gray, polished-stone gaze when he walked in a little after eight. "You look like Georgie Jessel the morning after he turned down *The Jazz Singer,"* she said.

"I lost the Keaton. To Viacom."

"Oh, that. I knew yesterday they were going to outbid you. I had lunch with one of the secretaries in their video division."

"Thanks for warning me."

"We learn from loss, kiddo. Say, you in trouble with the law? You had two calls this morning from a Sergeant Fish with the police." She squinted at the scratches on her message pad.

"What did he want?"

She shrugged. "Maybe one of his snitches tipped him where to look for Von Stroheim's *Greed."*

"If he calls again, tell him the line forms to the left."

He was at his desk, viewing outtakes from *Easy Rider* on the Movieola, when Ruth buzzed. "That policeman again."

"Which line?"

"He's not on the phone. He's here, and he brought company."

"Shoo them in, Ruthie. Shoo them in."

"No more of that. I knew Bogie; you don't sound a bit like him. And if you ever call me Ruthie again, you'll end up sounding like Linda Darnell."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He rose as two young men entered. The first had short sandy hair and clean-shaven cheeks with a suggestion of baby fat. His eyes were anything but babyish. The other, slightly older, had the bold nose and high flat cheeks of an Indian.

"Sergeant Fish?" Valentino shook the hand of the younger man, who looked as if he was in charge. His grip was moderate.

"Gill. Ernest Gill. This is my partner, John Redfern."

Silently cursing Ruth's bad memory for names, the film detective rescued his fingers from the Indian's corded grasp. "Did I nick Al Pacino's Mercedes in the Safeway parking lot?"

Gill didn't smile. "We're not with the L.A.P.D., Mr. Valentino. We're San Diego Homicide."

San Diego went off in his head like a late-night telephone bell. "Is it Craig Hunter?"

"Have you heard from him?"

"He called me last night from a bar there. He was drunk. If I'd thought he was driving—"

"He wasn't in an accident," Gill said. "His body was found in the men's room of a place called The Grotto at one fifty-five this morning. He was beaten to death."

Beaten to death. Numbly, Valentino cleared piles of bound scripts and publicity stills from a pair of scoop chairs and sank into his own behind the desk. While Gill sat, Redfern wandered the room, looking at the framed movie posters on the walls.

"Phone company says Hunter charged two long-distance calls last night to his home number," Gill said. "One was to his ex-wife in Laurel Canyon. The other was to your place on Sunset."

"He said he needed help."

"What kind of help?" The sergeant had his notebook out.

"I hung up on him before he could tell me. I assumed he was putting the arm on me, as usual. I wasn't up to it."

"He didn't say anything else?"

"He said he'd make it worth my while. He never had before, so I blew him off." Valentino talked through his guilt. "What was it, a mugging gone wrong?"

"It wasn't robbery. He still had his wrist watch and sixty dollars in his wallet."

"Maybe the mugger panicked and ran."

Redfern turned away from a scuffed and faded lobby card for *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari.* "His arms were broken just below the elbows." His voice was a flat guttural. "It's a local signature. Grundage muscle does it all the time."

"Mike Grundage?"

"You've heard of him?" Sergeant Gill leaned forward.

"It'd be hard not to have. He's appearing before a grand jury investigating organized crime in the motion picture industry. What would Craig have to do with Grundage?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"We were hoping you could tell us."

"Have you talked to Lorna Hunter? That's his ex-wife."

"We talked to her." Gill stood. "Thanks for your time. We may need a statement later. It's possible you were the last person to talk to Hunter."

The information did exactly nothing for Valentino's conscience.

Once, working for Kevin Brownlow, Valentino had found twenty-six feet of a key sequence from Abel Gance's epic *Napoleon* being used to demonstrate a home projector in a camera store in Lyons. Piecing together the circumstances of Craig Hunter's murder couldn't be much more difficult than assembling the scraps of a seventy-year-old movie.

Lorna Hunter lived in the house the court had awarded her, a pink stucco Spanish modern with a red-tile roof at the end of a street that twisted like a creek. Valentino had his finger on the buzzer when the door opened and he found himself in an embrace that smelled pungently of scent and gin.

"Thanks for coming," Lorna said when they parted. "Craig didn't have many friends left."

"I wish I'd been a better one."

"The better ones were the last to go."

He touched her shoulder and they moved inside. A tall blonde with a clean profile that was even more classical at thirty-one than it had been at twenty, Lorna was slim and fit in a cashmere top, tailored slacks, and sandals on her bare feet. Six years earlier she had startled ABC and a million fans by dropping out of the number-three sitcom in America, announcing her plans to devote all her time to making one man happy. Two years after the divorce, she was still not returning agents' calls.

Valentino accepted a glass of water and sat on the end of the big sofa that dominated the living room. Lorna curled up on the other end with a gin and tonic. He had never seen her drink before; at 9:45 A.M. she appeared to have a head start on the day.

"Did you know Craig was in this kind of trouble?" he asked.

"His gambling worried me. It used to be just recreation, but the last several times I saw him, all he could talk about was poker and the ponies and getting even. Until last Friday."

"What happened last Friday?"

"He came here to use the telephone. He said his call couldn't wait until he got to his apartment in Long Beach. Craig's dream was to start his own acting school. He was drunk, babbling something about having enough money soon to open a chain. I assumed he had a hot tip and was calling his bookie."

"Was he?"

"I don't know. He made the call from his old office with the door closed. He left here more excited than when he came."

Valentino sipped water. "Do you know if Craig owed money to Mike Grundage's loan sharks?"

"That's the assumption I made when the police told me Grundage

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

was involved. He must have been borrowing to pay off his debts. I mean, why else would someone—" She drained her glass quickly.

"Lorna, the sharks don't kill you for not paying up. It's bad business. At most they would have roughed him up and then worked out some sort of payment plan. A dead man is a dead loss."

"What, then?"

"I don't know. May I look in his office?"

She rose, swaying a little. He followed her into a small den containing a desk and chair and a stereo system as complicated as a NASA control panel. Valentino pointed at a battered trunk in the corner. "That doesn't quite match the room."

"Craig brought it with him Friday. He said there wasn't room in his apartment and asked if he could store it here. You can look inside; the police did. It's just some books."

He looked. They were filmographies: *Heroes of the Horrors, The Films of Boris Karloff, The Films of Bela Lugosi, The Man Behind the Cape, Dear Boris*—a dozen others, all similar. "Was Craig interested in horror films?"

"He hated them. His first part was a bit in *Bloodbath IV.* He said it was a junk genre and always had been."

Valentino closed the trunk and stood. The console telephone caught his eye. "Has anyone used this phone since Craig?"

"No. I almost never come in here."

He lifted the receiver and punched the Redial button.

A cool feminine voice answered. "Horace Lysander's office."

He hung up and looked at Lorna. "Who represented Craig during your divorce?"

"Cooper and Clive. Craig retained them ever since that phony paternity suit five years ago."

"He never used Horace Lysander?"

"Is that who answered? I never heard of him."

"You would if you watched the news. Lysander is Mike Grundage's legal counsel before the grand jury."

No shady Mob mouthpiece out of Central Casting, Horace Lysander was senior partner in a firm that took up two floors of a sparkling glass tower at Century City. A lacquered-looking receptionist let Valentino wait forty minutes, then waved him into an office nine times the size of his own, with a glass wall looking out on most of Southern California. A large, soft, smiling pink bald man in a beautiful gray suit, Lysander shook his hand and they sat down on either side of a desk the size of the battleship *Potemkin.*

"Are you with the police, Mr. Valentino?" The lawyer looked dubiously at his sweatshirt and brushed jeans.

"No, I'm looking into Craig Hunter's death as a friend."

"Two detectives were here earlier asking about Mr. Grundage, who's

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in New York on business. I assured them that to my knowledge my client never had any contact with this man Hunter."

"But you did, last Friday. He called you."

Lysander smiled. "I'm an old courtroom attorney, Mr. Valentino. I know when I'm being bluffed."

"So do I. Your office number was on his redial."

"Granted that's true, it proves nothing." But he shrugged. "His business was with Elizabeth Grundage, not Mike."

"His wife?"

"His mother. You're too young to remember Mike's father. Tony Grundage represented certain eastern interests in Hollywood during the so-called Golden Age of the thirties. He arranged the financing for *All Quiet on the Western Front, The Wizard of Oz, Frankenstein—"*

"Frankenstein?" Valentino remembered the books in Craig's office.

"Yes. That was before my time, of course, but I became his attorney in his last years, and represented Elizabeth when his will was probated. She was much younger than Tony. The family has retained me ever since."

"What business could Craig have had with a racketeer's widow?"

"I can't discuss details. He approached her with a transaction. When he found out I'd advised Elizabeth against it, he called me and became abusive, threatening. He was drunk. I hung up on him."

"How much of this have you told the police?"

"None of it. They asked if Mike Grundage knew Hunter and I denied it. They didn't ask if his mother knew him. I suppose I'll have to tell them now that I've told you."

"They'll ask about the transaction."

"That's privileged."

"It's withholding evidence in a homicide."

"Are you a lawyer, Mr. Valentino?"

"No, but I helped restore three Perry Mason movies starring Warren William." He smiled briefly. "One way or another the police will root out the details. You might as well share them with me."

"Not without my client's permission."

"I can wait outside while you call her."

Lysander smiled again, somewhat differently. He had such an inventory that the single word "smile" was insufficient, like "snow" to an Eskimo. "What do you do for a living, Mr. Valentino?"

Valentino told him, as briefly as possible.

"If you ever need a change, this firm can use an investigator." He lifted his telephone receiver.

After ten minutes, the film detective was invited back into Lysander's office. The atmosphere seemed warmer.

"Are you familiar with an old-time director named Robert Florey?" the lawyer asked.

"The Murders in the Rue Morgue. Universal, nineteen thirty-two."

"Also *Frankenstein."*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"That was James Whale."

"Not at the start. Florey, who wrote the screenplay, was to direct the picture originally as a vehicle for Universal's hottest property."

"Bela Lugosi," said Valentino. "The star of *Dracula.* He tested for *Frankenstein,* then backed out."

"I forgot you're a historian. Florey shot two reels of Lugosi stumping around in a costume and makeup of his own device. No one was happy with the result. After Lugosi left, the project was taken away from Florey and given to Whale, who assigned the role of Frankenstein's monster to an unemployed truck driver named William Henry Pratt."

"Boris Karloff."

"It looked better on a marquee. The picture made Karloff a star, saved the studio from bankruptcy, and assured Tony Grundage a power base in Hollywood. On his advice, his people provided the seed money for the project. By now the test was forgotten. The footage was considered destroyed."

Valentino said nothing. In spite of his mission, he was beginning to catch that old familiar scent.

"When Grundage agreed to finance the property, all preproduction materials were turned over to him. Motion picture memorabilia didn't command anywhere near the prices it does now. He placed the material in storage and apparently forgot about it. When Elizabeth came to me with Craig Hunter's offer I advised her against accepting until we knew just what those test reels were worth on the open market."

"How much did he offer?"

"Two hundred fifty thousand dollars."

"Craig would have been hard pressed to raise a hundred dollars, let alone a quarter million."

"Nevertheless, that was the amount."

"Where does Mike Grundage fit in?"

"Nowhere. You're the first person I've discussed this with. Mike never brought it up. He may not even know about the film."

"Craig's two broken arms say he knows something."

"Say that in public and our next conversation will be in court." Lysander's expression went from severe to smiling, like water subsiding. "The police mentioned an ex-wife. Are you acting on her behalf?"

"I've known Lorna nearly as long as I knew Craig."

"I understand. Elizabeth Grundage means more to me than just a client."

Valentino watched the freeways clogging up outside the window. "Are you going to make the test footage available?"

"I'm afraid that's a moot point." The lawyer rolled back his chair and stood. "Two nights ago, someone broke into the storage vault and made off with both reels."

Inching his way home amid rush-hour traffic, Valentino weighed what he'd learned on his mental balance scale. He had no doubt that Craig

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Hunter had stolen the *Frankenstein* test reels. He wondered if that was the original plan, or if Craig had lined up a buyer who would back his princely offer. It was a sound investment; recently an original pre-production poster for the same film had brought $100,000 at Sotheby's. What Valentino needed to know was who was interested, and how Craig had found out about the footage to begin with.

At a video store three blocks from his house, the film detective rented *Frankenstein* and *Dracula.* The kid behind the counter tried to interest him in a low-budget slasher film instead. "You'll wet your pants screaming."

"As attractive as that sounds, I'll stick with these."

At home he called his contact at Sotheby's and asked for the name of the party who had paid so much for the rare *Frankenstein* poster. Reluctant at first, upon being reminded how much of UCLA's acquisition funds Valentino had channeled to the auction house, the contact came up with the name J. Arthur Greenwood.

"The magazine publisher?"

"He's almost as regular a customer as you are."

Later Valentino fixed a simple dinner and ate it in his screening room, where he watched the two horror classics on his front-projection system. Although creaky in places, both were entertaining, and occasionally still frightening. Karloff, he noted, brought a heartbreaking eloquence to Frankenstein's mute monster that was missing from Lugosi's stilted and somewhat hammy performance as the Undead Count. Valentino concluded that *Frankenstein* had benefited from the vicissitudes of fate.

He rewound the tapes and called Lorna Hunter. She sounded sleepy. He hoped she wasn't still drunk.

"I just wanted to make sure you're okay," he said.

"That's sweet of you. Now that the shock's worn off, I'm actually relieved. I still cared about Craig; it hurt to see him going down and down. At least he can't go down any farther."

"Have you been eating?"

"You mean am I still drinking. It made me sick, so I stopped. I don't know what Craig saw in it."

Relieved, he said, "I've got a lead on the angle he was working. I'm going to follow it up tomorrow."

"Shouldn't you leave that to the police?"

"I will if it looks like anything. Right now it's just one more theory they don't need."

"Be careful, Val. I'm running out of people I care about."

He assured her he would and said goodbye wondering why he hated ending the conversation.

J. Arthur Greenwood said, "I'd kill for those test reels."

Seated in a conversation area in the magazine publisher's office the morning after screening *Frankenstein* and *Dracula,* Valentino noted

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the collector's madness in his host's eye. Greenwood, who in his sixties continued to dye his thin hair and pencil moustache a glossy black, leaned forward from his leather sofa, gripping the film detective's knee.

The office was decorated to resemble a dungeon, complete with clammy stone-looking wallpaper, a ceiling fixture that might have been the chandelier from the original silent *Phantom of the Opera,* and an authentic iron maiden leaning in one corner, its deadly spikes glittering like needles. It all went perfectly with the image of the man whose flagship publication, *Horrorwood,* had communicated his passion for weird and fantastic movies to the entire baby-boom generation.

"I think Craig Hunter *was* killed for them," Valentino said.

Greenwood straightened. "I heard he was killed. There wasn't anything about the test reels on the news."

"Did you know him?"

"Craig and I were poker buddies. Ever since I interviewed him on the set of *Bloodbath IV,* before he hit the big time."

"What do you know about the *Frankenstein* test?"

"Everything. It's part of horror film lore. But I'm the only one who had the interest and the energy to link the reels' existence to Tony Grundage's widow."

"Then you were the one behind Craig's offer to buy them."

"Who else? Craig was into me for a bundle, and friendly poker is still poker. I told him he could work it off by fronting for me with Elizabeth Grundage. Since I bought the *Frankenstein* poster, everyone knows I'll pay any price for rare horror memorabilia. If she found out I was interested, she might try to hold me up for a million. She *was* married to a gangster."

"Did you authorize him to steal the footage if he had to?"

"Of course not! Half the fun of owning something special is showing it off. I couldn't do that if I got it illegally. Is that what he tried to do?"

"He did more than try. Something he said to his ex-wife makes it look like he was planning to double-cross you and sell the reels himself. A thing like that might make you angry enough to kill him when you found out."

The collector's gleam hardened. "Are you accusing me?"

"You said you'd kill for those reels."

"You're in the business. Can you honestly claim you've never said the same thing about a film you really wanted?"

Valentino thought of the Buster Keaton comedy he had lost to Viacom. Aloud he said, "Some collectors say it and mean it."

The magazine publisher slumped. He was barrel-chested but going soft, poised on the edge of obesity. "I'll never forget the first time I saw *House of Frankenstein* in a neighborhood theater. I identified with the monster, who couldn't help being what he was, but was persecuted by ignorant villagers because he was different. I was a fat kid on a city playground; I couldn't defend myself from bullies, but that poor clumsy

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

brute with spikes in his neck could and did. I found justice there in the dark. Outside, I couldn't even smack a wasp. I still can't."

Valentino believed him. "Can you think of anyone who'd want that footage enough to commit murder for it?"

"Dozens. But they couldn't know Craig had it. What about Mike Grundage?"

"The police are working that angle." The film detective stood. "Thanks for your time. I enjoy your magazine."

"I'm afraid you're in the minority. The new generation isn't interested in the old monsters. They want slashers and flesh-eating zombies and writhing entrails onscreen. No moral code, no mythic quality. Now the monsters are in the audience."

Valentino drove back to UCLA to work. He was out of leads.

He parked underground and boarded the elevator to ground level. Two large men crowded in with him. The doors closed, the car started upward. One of the men squashed the emergency stop button. The car halted with a lurch.

A fist struck Valentino low. He emptied his lungs, groped for the safety bar. His legs were swept from under him. As he fell, a knee came up toward his face. That was the last thing he saw for a while. But he could hear.

"Bust his arms?" A wheezy, broken-windpipe voice.

"Boss said no."

The second voice was flat and toneless. Now he smelled stale cigarette breath, felt the heat of a face bent close to his. The owner of the flat voice said, "Forget *Frankenstein,* Rudolph. Or take the stairs."

The car started moving again. It stopped, the doors rumbled. Fresh air came in. Valentino heard the wheezy voice one last time. "Rudolph. That's rich." The doors closed.

He didn't know how long he lay there before someone found him. It was Ruth, his secretary. "You look like Errol Flynn on Sunday morning." She helped him to his feet. "Want to go to the medical center?"

He could see now. His nose was bleeding, but it seemed unbroken. "Just tip me into my car."

He drove through a pounding headache. At home he vomited into the toilet, washed his face, then vomited again. He'd never been knocked out before; all those Alan Ladd movies he'd seen had said nothing about throwing up.

The doorbell had been ringing for some time before he went to answer it, holding a wet washcloth to his forehead. It was Special Delivery. He signed for it and carried the package inside. It was square, slightly smaller than a pizza box and twice as thick. He recognized Craig Hunter's handwriting.

With unsteady hands he tore off the paper and undid the straps that secured a black metal box. There were two aluminum film cans inside. He prised one open, removed the reel, and unwound enough of the film

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to study it against the light. For old silver-nitrate stock it was in remarkably good condition; the storage vault must have been climate-controlled. After a minute he rewound the reel and returned it to its can.

His heart was hammering. It throbbed in his aching head, fed his brain. He had a pretty good idea who'd killed Craig.

The telephone rang. "Valentino."

"You recuperate fast. I didn't think you'd pick up so soon."

He recognized the voice. "What do you want?"

"Hunter had only one friend left he could trust with what he had. That's why he called you that night. You know what I want."

"If I don't come through, will you tell them to break my arms next time?"

"I've got someone here who wants to talk to you."

There was a pause, then another voice came on. "Val?"

"Lorna?" He gripped the receiver hard enough to crack it.

Lorna Hunter started to say something, but was cut off. The other voice came back. "You've seen enough crime pictures to know how this works. The film for the woman. No police. Midnight tonight. Here's the address."

Valentino fumbled for a pencil, started to write it down, then stopped. He knew the place.

The Hollywood Wax Museum was one of Valentino's favorite haunts, a place to go and revisit the giants of his *Late Show* youth. At night it seemed less friendly. Its Art Deco facade gleamed like a mortuary in the smog-muted starlight.

The lock on the front door was broken. He'd thought to bring along a flashlight; once inside he poked its beam around the corridor beyond the ticket counter. Although he hadn't been told where to go in the building, he walked past the Indiana Jones and *Star Wars* exhibits, past *Easy Rider* and James Dean and *Gone with the Wind* to the Chamber of Horrors.

Here a single overhead fixture burned, casting atmospheric shadows over the grotesque waxen faces of Lon Chaney, the Creature from the Black Lagoon, Peter Lorre, and the Mummy. He paused between Lugosi's Dracula and Karloff's Monster, but that wasn't where the light was. He found it shining over the dungeon set from *The Pit and the Pendulum.*

It was a lot more convincing than J. Arthur Greenwood's office. The stone walls were realistically moldy-looking, and the blood on the razor-sharp axe swinging above the pallet where Vincent Price lay seemed as if it were about to drip. The woman chained upside down by her ankles eight feet above the floor was the only sour note; nylon blouses and lounging slacks were not yet in fashion at the time of the Inquisition. It took Valentino a second to realize that this figure was not made of wax. It was Lorna. Her eyes were wild. She whimpered through her gag.

"Melodramatic, I admit. But it seemed appropriate."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

As the newcomer spoke, he strolled forward through the shadows at the end of the corridor.

Valentino recognized the voice from the telephone. He said, "No surprises in this script. Greenwood's too gentle, and you're the only other person who knew Craig had the footage. Mike Grundage wouldn't have cared. He's got his own problems."

Horace Lysander stopped under the light. The lawyer's hands were in the pockets of his suit.

"Fortunately the police aren't as logical as you," he said. "They pile on the first good suspect. That's what I counted on."

Something tugged at the package under the film detective's arm. He wheeled to face a man who might have posed for the figure of Frankenstein's monster. "Let's have the merch, Rudolph." He made a small motion with a big automatic.

His toneless speech was familiar to Valentino. He gave the man the box containing the two test reels.

"What's a high-priced attorney need with a quarter-million dollars in old film?" he asked.

"Not a thing. I'm going to destroy it, along with anyone who would jeopardize Elizabeth Grundage's privacy by bringing up her past associations."

"So you hired this goon and his partner to beat Craig Hunter to death and pin it on Mike Grundage. Wouldn't that reflect just as much light on his mother?"

"They haven't met in years. She had higher hopes for him. Mike's a cheap gangster like his old man Tony. Call it payback for all the crimes he'd have been convicted of but for me."

"Why didn't you have my arms broken in the elevator?"

"You needed them to carry the reels. That's Earl, by the way. You weren't properly introduced before. He and Roy used to work for Mike. Mike thinks they still do, but Mike never got them off a murder charge in open court. Isn't that right, Roy?"

"Sure thing, boss."

The wheezy response drew Valentino's attention to the top of the dungeon's false wall. A man nearly as ugly as Earl stood on a stepladder behind it, gripping the end of the toggle that secured the chain Lorna was hanging from to the ceiling.

"Tell him to get his hand away," Valentino said. "If she falls she'll break her neck."

Lysander smiled. "One less thing to break when they finish you both off and snap your arms below the elbows."

"It won't wash. Why would Grundage have *us* killed?"

"Because the police think he had Hunter killed for stiffing his sharks, and because you both decided to play Dick Tracy. I never reported those missing reels. Neither did you, or you wouldn't have come here alone." His smile broadened. "I'll defend Mike at his trial. Who knows? I might even get him off."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Earl put down the reels and stuck his gun under his coat, flexing his fingers. Valentino hit him with the flashlight.

"Roy!" barked Lysander.

Roy jerked loose the toggle.

While Earl staggered, Valentino lunged. He caught Lorna around the waist with both arms. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Earl fumbling for his gun.

"Police! Lose it!"

Earl swung on the new voice, automatic in hand. A shot rang off the walls of the corridor. He grasped his arm and fell to one knee. Sergeant Ernest Gill kept his smoking revolver trained on Earl while Officer John Redfern sprinted past, covering Roy and Lysander with an automatic as big as Earl's.

Raising his hands, the lawyer glared at Valentino. "I said no police!"

"You've seen too many movies," said the film detective.

In the screening room in his home, Valentino cradled the receiver of his telephone. "That was Elizabeth Grundage. She's agreed to sell the *Frankenstein* test to UCLA for the amount Craig offered, as soon as the prosecutor's through with it."

Lorna, seated on the sofa, sipped from a glass of iced tea.

"As soon as it's been transferred to safety stock. I won't risk something this valuable to a humid police property room." He finished threading the film through the projector. "Ready?"

"Is it going to be scary?"

"If it is, we'll hang on to each other." He turned off the lights and started the movie. ●

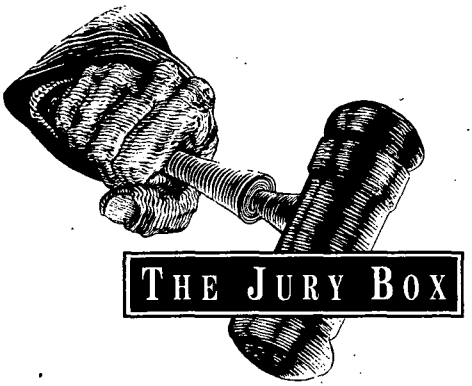
Period Crime

by Rex Ponti

A very low Georgian named Dave
Purloined a gold ring from a grave.
A spectre arose
And cried, "I propose
To haunt you until you behave."

Poem ©Rex Ponti 1998

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



by Jon L. Breen

Fictional private eyes inhabit nearly every major city in America, plus Canada, Great Britain, Australia, and some non-English-speaking venues; they may be tough or retiring, male or female, gay or straight; some live in the present, others in the past; their cases may be strictly invented or drawn from real-life crime.

Among the stories in *The Cutting Edge: Best and Brightest Mystery Writers of the 90's* (Carroll & Graf, $12.95), collected by Janet Hutchings mostly from 1996 and 1997 issues of *EQMM,* are cases for several top-notch sleuths-for-hire. Two of the best confront pure whydunits: Lawrence Block's Matt Scudder in the unconventional "Looking for David," with its Poe-like sense of the macabre, and Marcia Muller's Sharon McCone in the surprising "Solo." Others in action include Val McDermid's Kate Brannigan, Reginald Hill's Joe Sixsmith, and Jeremiah Healy's John Francis Cuddy.

Healy and Cuddy are also present in solid form in the latest anthology from Mickey Spillane and Max Allan Collins, *Private Eyes* (Signet, $6.50), comprising sixteen new stories, all in the traditional first person. It's a distinguished volume, including one of the too-rare appearances of Edward D. Hoch's Al Darlan; a strong story about Michael Collins's Dan Fortune, exposing a particularly vile misuse of animals; and a haunting "Nameless" tale by Bill Pronzini. Two of the writers (I won't say which two) explore very similar situations in different ways with comparable effectiveness.

Co-editor Spillane's lead-off story "The Night I Died," based on an unproduced 1953 radio script about Mike Hammer, appears for the first time in its short-story version. My first reaction: how dead-on accurate was Betty Comden and Adolph Green's parody in their narration for the "Girl Hunt" ballet in the 1953 Fred Astaire musical *The Band Wagon.* With its stylized cityscapes and writ-large events and characters, a Spillane story is to most other private-eye fiction as grand opera

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to a naturalistic play. Opera goers accept simplistic plotting, exaggerated emotions, and rudimentary acting for the beauty of the music, without which their devotion would be baffling. When it comes to Spillane, call me tone deaf.

What are the private eyes up to at novel length?

**** Michelle Spring: *Standing in the Shadows,* Ballantine, $23. Two years ago, 11-year-old Daryll Flatt confessed to the bludgeoning murder of his elderly foster mother. Now his older brother hires Laura Principal, Cambridge (England) academic-turned-private-eye, to find the real truth. Canadian-born Spring delivers an engaging cast of characters, builds a well-calibrated puzzle plot, and asks troubling questions of why children kill.

**** Max Allan Collins: *Flying Blind,* Dutton, $24.95. Chicago's Nate Heller is in the middle of yet another great twentieth-century mystery: the disappearance of Amelia Earhart during her 1937 round-the-world flight. The surprisingly credible solution is a variant on one of the more sensational theories. Earhart comes across as a complex, likable, believably flawed heroine; her husband G.P. Putnam as one of the most despicable villains of recent memory. Another winner in a great series.

*** Loren D. Estleman: *The Witchfinder,* Mysterious, $23. Detroit's Amos Walker, employed by a famous, now-dying architect to find out who faked a photograph that caused him to end a love affair, represents the shamus at his most Philip Marlowe-like traditional: he makes wisecracks in dialogue and cynical social observations in narrative; he suffers head injuries; he writes prose rich in simile and metaphor; he makes us know his city; he's tough; he's incorruptible. Estleman is one of the best at this style, and he does a better mystery plot than Chandler usually did.

*** John Lutz: *Oops!,* St. Martin's, $22.95. In contrast to Walker, St. Louis sleuth Nudger, best-known for his nervous stomach, belongs to the new style of less overtly heroic P.I.'s. In one of the more humorous entries in an always-amusing series, Nudger helps female private eye Lacy Tumulty, hospitalized by a vicious attack, investigate the seemingly accidental death of a young woman who fell down a flight of stairs in her basement. A staple Lutz variation on the menacing odd-job-style thug figures in a nice reversal on a familiar situation.

*** Sue Grafton: *"N" is for Noose,* Holt, $25. Santa Teresa, California's Kinsey Millhone's latest case is surely the only one in this group to boast a million-copy first printing. Kinsey is asked by the widow of a mountain town policeman to find out what was weighing on him in the months before his death by apparent heart attack. The plot unfolds very slowly in the first half, in which Kinsey doesn't go to the bathroom without filling the reader in, but the conclusion is outstanding. Grafton's best books are distinguished detective novels; the least of them are still enjoyable for

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

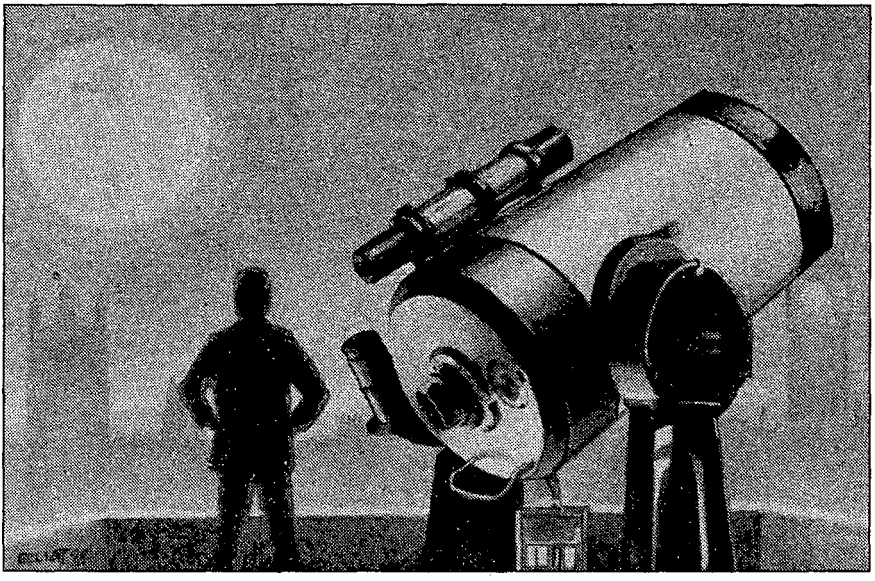
their heroine's distinctive voice. Put this one somewhere in the middle.

** Larry Maness: *Strangler,* Lyford Books, 505B San Marin Drive, Suite 300, Novato, CA 94945-1340; $19.95. The third case for Boston P.I. Jake Eaton and his formidable dog Watson posits that Albert DeSalvo was not the Boston Strangler and that the fabled serial killer is back at work thirty years later. Low-key and readable, the writing ranges from keen observations and good turns of phrase to well-worn clichés of plot and dialogue. (Unlike Collins, Maness provides no note to separate the real from the fictitious.)

** Carol Higgins Clark: *Twanged,* Warner, $22. Though at least the third novel in which a female P.I. takes a job bodyguarding a country singer, this must be the first with an enchanted Irish fiddle as mcguffin. Regan Reilly, like her creator, the daughter of a best-selling mystery novelist, belongs more to the cozy amateur-detective whodunit than the mean streets, but the deus ex Internet solution eschews the kind of fair-play clueing such a book owes its readers. The style and short cross-cutting chapters suggest Mary Higgins Clark with more attempted humor and less structural mastery.

Two stories about Jesse Sublett's tough L.A. shamus Clapton, wildly plotted and written with pulpish gusto, appear in *Deader Than Hell* (Gryphon Double Novel 16; Gryphon Publications, P.O. Box 209, Brooklyn, NY 11228-0209; $10). Publisher Gary Lovisi introduces Sublett's stories with a complete list of the Clapton series to date, and his own *The Mission* forms the other half of the back-to-back pairing. The whole book totals about eighty pages. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



Art by Darryl Elliott

THE GENTLEMANLY THING

by David Williams

"What does Mr. Corbish think?" She looked across at me, making it seem, from her tone and the searching expression in her soulful, come-hither eyes, that she would really value my professional opinion.

"I think the balance of the portfolio is just about perfect, Lady Wellbright," I replied, in my experienced-stockbroker voice, with an extra touch of sincerity. The relief in her expression was immediate and profound—as though my approval had meant everything to her. "What's for certain is, Mr. Trist knows what he's doing when it comes to investments," I added with confidence, and a deferential smile in the direction of my boss, old Andrew Trist, who was sitting between us, at the head of the table. In my private opinion, it had probably been a decade since he'd even been certain about the way to the men's room, but I owed him—in particular, I owed him my job.

We were in the oak-panelled conference room at Sethick & Trist, stockbrokers, in London's Cannon Street, close to St. Paul's cathedral. I'd been with the firm six months. After failing some accountancy examinations, I'd switched from learning to be an accountant to learning to be a stockbroker, because stockbroking was easier. To be honest,

©1998 by David Williams

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I'd failed those exams for the second time, and I'd had no option but to leave the accountants I'd been with at the time. British stockbrokers didn't have to pass examinations—well, not then they didn't. I often thought I'd have done better to have stayed in the army in the first place, despite the spot of personal trouble I'd got into. That had involved the wife of a senior officer. My stiff-upper-lip colonel had made it clear that I must, as he put it, do the gentlemanly thing—resign my commission and leave the service. I did, but I *could* have stayed on and bluffed it out.

David Williams's new novel-length whodunit, *A Terminal Case,* appeared in July 1997 in the U.K., and was the fourth of his twenty-one novels to feature Inspector Parry of the Welsh police. In *The Gentlemanly Thing,* Mr. Williams eschews his native Wales to return to a London locale, and a tale that features one of his favorite fictional themes—murder, for love or money? ✝

My father, another stickler for gentlemanly conduct, had been a valued client of Sethick & Trist for years. He'd also been a client of the accountants, which is how I'd got the job with them. Father was a property developer, or had been until the recession in the mid nineteen eighties killed the business—and Father with it, plus his fortune. Anyway, when the time came, Andrew Trist (another gentleman to the core, of course) remembered his obligation to my old man—one of the few things he did seem to remember—and took me on as a trainee. I was twenty-eight at the time, nearly penniless, and pretty glad of the job.

Sethick & Trist were about as old-fashioned as you could get. They seldom acquired new clients, but the old ones tended to hang on, either out of inertia, or because Trist never chased them to pay their accounts on time, or—and this applied to a lot of the richer ones—because they actually valued his investment judgment, which, I must admit, was surprisingly good. Sethick, the other founding partner, had retired some years before this, so that Trist owned the place—and all the handsome profits.

The other solid reason why the firm survived was because old Trist paid minimal wages to a minuscule staff. He specialised in recruiting personable dropouts like me, with private school and armed services backgrounds, whom the clients—especially the women clients—accepted for their classy manners and appearance, and the competent way they handled the wine list at lunch. You didn't have to know much about stockbroking, not that I've ever believed there's much to know about it anyway.

The meeting that morning with Lady Wellbright—Sir Gregory Wellbright's dazzling third wife—had been set up at her and her husband's joint instigation. Sir Gregory was in heavy arms procurement—

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

meaning he flogged out-of-date guns, tanks, and military aircraft to under-developed countries at knockdown prices, but at a fantastic rate of commission for himself. His wife was more than thirty years younger than he was, and they'd only been married two years. She was a glamorous, if minor, ex-actress—a singer and dancer who knew absolutely nothing about investments or business. This was why they were arranging for her to pick up the rudiments, so that if anything happened to him, she wouldn't be at a loss to know how his estate ought to be run—his considerable estate, even after the divorce settlements on his previous wives. To give the present incumbent some genuine hands-on experience, Sir Gregory had made over some money with which she was to build a share portfolio of her own, but strictly under the guidance of Sethick & Trist.

Andrew Trist had spent the first part of the meeting telling the lady what a wizard I was at the business, and how he was putting me in day-to-day charge of her investments. In truth, this was simply to ensure that when she telephoned the firm, she'd ask for me and not for him. The money her husband had given her to invest wasn't so substantial that the old man wanted to risk wasting his own time on what might prove to be frequent consultations with her: As a rule, women clients tended to take up more time than men, probably because they were more careful and enquiring. Then he gave her a lot of gobbledygook about gilt-edged securities, equities, dividends, yields, and the rest, before he'd shown her the list of shares we advised she should put her money into, backed up by a daunting pile of annual reports covering each company involved.

Her question about what I thought of the share portfolio had pleased Trist. It meant I'd made my mark. Soon afterwards, he packed us off in good time for me to show her ladyship around the London Stock Exchange building, up the road, before I took her to lunch. He apologised for not being able to join us, hinting darkly, and with a heavy sigh, as though the fact bored him, that he had a business date with an unnamed member of the Royal Family. This was his favourite way of excusing himself from anything: None of the Royals was a client of the firm, so far as I knew.

"This is a terrible chore for you, isn't it?" Lady Wellbright said to me later, sipping a gin and tonic in the Fountain Bar of the Ritz, before we went in to eat. She had difficulty pronouncing the letter "r" so that words such as "terrible" came out as "tewibble"—something I found rather endearing: It didn't disguise the fact that her upper-crust accent was a bit phoney, but then, not too many girls who start off in the chorus are born with silver spoons in their mouths.

"It's anything but a chore, Anna," I answered, leaning forward earnestly and emphasising the words. She had already insisted we use first names. "And Mr. Trist doesn't often give total responsibility for handling important clients to less senior members of the firm," I added.

She giggled—her laugh, like her speaking voice, had a musical ring

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to it—then she crossed her fantastic legs under the short skirt she was wearing. They were real dancer's legs, long and shapely, but with strong calf muscles that she was in the habit of tightening, then relaxing, in a sequence I found riveting. "That's because he trusts you completely. He said as much," she insisted. "Anyway, I'm not an important client." She blinked the long eyelashes several times in a way that was almost demure.

"You certainly are important," I insisted gallantly.

"You mean my husband is. I like Mr. Trist," she went on quickly, "except I'm glad I don't have to deal with him. He's very old, isn't he? A lot older even than Gregory, I should think." She gave me that winning smile again. "So you think you'll be able to . . . to handle me all right," she completed, this time looking me straight in the eyes.

"I hope so," I answered, holding the gaze, and hoping she meant what I thought she meant.

"Mmm. I'm sure of it, Jeremy," she replied, pronouncing my name again as "Jewemy," and brushing a hand against mine as she reached for her glass, and in a way that seemed more intentional than accidental.

I believe it was at that moment that I fell hopelessly in love with Anna—and I think she must have known it.

Despite that quite promising start, my relationship with Anna Wellbright remained a perfectly proper one—worst luck. I was careful to keep the depth of my feeling for her unspoken. I dared not make any kind of pass at her, because, if it was rejected and I insulted her in the process, I stood to lose a lot more than my self-esteem: Anna was my living. So I continued simply in the role of both investment adviser and stock-market instructor to an eager pupil. We talked often on the telephone and lunched together most weeks. All this pleased old Trist. He didn't mind about the increase in my expense claims either, and he actually gave me a rise in salary—nothing overwhelming, but enough to justify my trading in my Honda motorbike for a newer, more powerful one. Anyone else might have been prompted to buy a small car instead, except I've been a motorcycle buff all my life.

My guise as Anna's mentor also pleased her husband. I learned as much the night I was invited to dine with them at their town flat in St. John's Wood. This was about three months after my first meeting with Anna.

"You're doing a good job. She seems to know a lot more about investing already," Sir Gregory said to me over our predinner drinks, which he and I had taken out onto the roof garden. Anna had gone to the kitchen to check on something. The flat was the single penthouse atop an eight-storey block, with impressive views in every direction, but especially to the south, across London. It was early November, but quite warm still, with a full moon. "I've already told Andrew Trist I'm pleased," my host went on. He spoke rapidly, in a clipped, low mono-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tone, with brief pauses between sentences. "Trist thinks very highly of you." The compliments had been offered in a very matter-of-fact way.

"Your wife's a good pupil, sir," I replied, aware that what he'd just said had certainly accounted for my salary increase.

"Maybe. But she's no experience in business. Too few wives know about coping with investments. I'm older than Anna. Chances are I'll die before she does." He hesitated for longer this time before going on, as if he was reconsidering the accuracy of the last point—except it seemed blindingly logical to me. "I'll be leaving her a wealthy woman. Very wealthy. She'll have earned it, too. But she'll be entirely in the hands of professionals—lawyers, accountants, stockbrokers," he continued. Old Trist was always saying he was the firm's richest client by far. As Wellbright droned on, I was wondering idly what he meant about Anna earning her inheritance. "I'm making sure now she'll be in the right hands. People she can trust," he said. "Young professionals, like yourself, but right for the big job when the time comes."

"I'm sure that's sound, sir," I agreed. I'd already met the lawyer, but only briefly. He was a bright but unassuming chap called Eric. Anna had described the accountant to me; he'd been the first of us to be appointed. His name was Charles. She had said she'd arrange for me to meet him too. That was when she'd told me that both Eric and Charles were considered high flyers by their employers—Eric in the law firm Sir Gregory used, Charles with his accountants. Anna never did actually fix up the meeting with Charles.

"Incidentally, specifying that you should all be under thirty was Anna's idea. Good one, too," Sir Gregory put in next. "What's most important, of course, is that she understands the function each of you'll be performing for her." He swallowed the remains of a large Scotch. "Ready for another?" he asked, eyeing the remains of my drink.

"No, I'm fine, thank you, sir," I replied, assuming abstemiousness would be one of the tests of a suitable business-minder for Anna when the time came.

"Then I won't either," he responded firmly. "They've told me to cut down. Come and see my telescope." He'd suddenly led off sharply to the far corner of the building, and was soon pulling off the waterproof cover of a powerful telescope. It was set up there on a swivel tripod which was mounted on a two-step circular metal plinth. Moving around the plinth, the viewer could swing the instrument through a full circle. "Have a look," he said. I did. The magnification was fantastic. "Take care," he warned gruffly, as I swung round from south through to northwest, from a close-up view of the London Zoo clocktower to one of Hampstead church. His warning had come because, when you stepped backwards off the plinth on one side, the guardrail of the building behind you was a bit low.

Later, as we were walking back into the living room, I said tactfully: "You're thinking a long way ahead, of course, sir."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"About when Anna becomes a widow? Sure. But the principle doesn't alter, however long I last."

He was a small man, small, wiry, and dark, with sallow cheeks and sunken eyes with what I sensed was an arrogant streak in them, if not something worse than arrogant. I knew his age was sixty-seven because I'd looked him up in *Who's Who.* He'd been born in Manchester, and at sixteen had gone straight from a state school to a job in a large electronics company where he'd ended up as sales director. After that, he'd set up on his own as an international marketing consultant. In addition, he was now a nonexecutive director of half a dozen public companies. His hobbies were listed as opera and astronomy. True to form, he spent all of dinner lauding the merits of Wagner.

I went home that evening feeling pleased with myself, at the same time wondering how a young, vivacious, beautiful woman like Anna could stand living with a man not just so much older than she was, but as basically boring and humourless as Wellbright. Before I'd reached home—a poky, one-bedroomed flat in Clapham—I'd reluctantly come to the conclusion that she must be doing it for the money.

"I expect you wonder how I can stand living with Gregory," Anna said to me near the end of our lunch the following week. We were at a French restaurant in Soho we both liked, at a discreet corner table. The ambiance of the place encouraged intimate exchanges, but had never before generated anything so explosively intimate as what she'd just uttered.

"It . . . it had occurred to me, yes," I answered; then I added, "He's a very powerful character, of course. Hidden depths, I expect." That was to be on the safe side, in case I'd misunderstood her drift.

"He's a boor, and a sadistic brute with it," she said. "See that?" She lifted the short sleeve of a silk blouse she had on, revealing a hideous black bruise just below the shoulder. "Hurting me is how he gets his kicks. I'd rather not go into the details, but I tell you he's kinky and savage. Of course, he's always careful to hurt me where the damage won't show, even when he's drunk, and that's pretty often."

"But that's outrageous," I said. "I can hardly believe it." Except I was beginning to understand perhaps what he'd meant about her earning her inheritance before he died.

"I've never told a living soul before this moment." She paused, and took a deep breath. "He doesn't care for me anymore, never did, really. Except physically. And that way he behaves as if he owns me. It's so . . . degrading, as well as painful. You wouldn't believe the things he does. I've come to hate him, Jeremy. To hate him with all my being. I'd give anything to get away from him. It was bearable till I met you. Just bearable. But not anymore. You *are* in love with me, aren't you?"

I swallowed. "Yes. Since the first day. I didn't think—"

"That I knew? I've known for ages. And that you didn't dare say, because you didn't know what my reaction would be." She put a hand

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

on my knee under the table. "Well, I'll tell you now, I feel the same way about you as you do about me. I've held off telling you because I've thought up to now it was pointless. But seeing you and Gregory together the other night, I've changed my mind. I'm so crazy about you, sometimes I don't know what to do with myself."

"Well, that's . . . that's just wonderful," I said. "So why not just leave him? Come and live with me." Except, as soon as I'd said it, I realised the proposal was too cavalier by half.

"That'd be heavenly, darling," she answered, "but what would we use for money?"

She was dead right to ask. My salary wasn't big enough to keep her in shoes, let alone in a London penthouse and a country mansion—yes, they had one of those too, in Wiltshire. And even if her husband let her keep the money he'd given her to invest, at her standard of living, she'd have been through it in a year. "It'd mean roughing it in the proverbial garret, I'm afraid," I said.

"I've done that, darling, and never again. Not even for you. You're probably wondering why we can't just have an affair?" She was reading my mind, of course. "But I couldn't bear living a lie," she'd added, without waiting for my answer to the question. "And anyway, I don't want some sneaky, sordid affair. I want you. Forever." Her hand squeezed my thigh harder as she uttered hopelessly, "I'm afraid I can't go back to the stage, either. Even if I was up to it, I've been out of the business too long."

"You could . . . just divorce him. You have the grounds. Cruelty," I said, figuring that way she'd get half his assets.

She shook her head. "His other two wives spoiled that idea. When we married, I had to sign a contract that says if I ever divorce him, I get forty thousand pounds a year for the rest of my life, unless or until I remarry. And that's it. Nothing else."

"And if you do remarry?" I pressed, except I'd already figured the answer.

"The money would stop," she said: So I'd been right, first guess. "At the time, I was all starry-eyed and couldn't believe we ever would part," she recalled flatly. "In any case, forty thousand seemed reasonable. It doesn't after you've been living at ten times that rate for over two years." She looked into my eyes. "Does that sound terribly mercenary, Jeremy?"

"Not at all. I think I'd feel the same if I were in your place. But the cruelty, the sadism—"

"Is awful," she interrupted. "But I've survived it so far. Just."

"Of course," I offered, "if you go on living with him as his wife, you'll get the whole of his estate when he does die."

She sighed. "That's what keeps me going. That I'll be very rich when he's gone. Trouble is, he's healthy as an ox, and just as strong. I'm only scared stiff that one day he'll kill me, when he's in one of his frenzies. I'm serious. Some nights he behaves like a raving maniac." Suddenly her voice lowered. "Jeremy, have you . . . have you ever killed a man?"

"No," I answered, "but as a soldier, I was prepared to kill in a just

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cause. Had to be." If I'd thought for a second, I wouldn't have given such a pompously chivalrous reply, especially as it produced the response I might have known it would.

"Would you kill for me? Kill Gregory? For us? In as just a cause as you could ever have faced in the army? And afterwards, we could live together forever, and be so rich. Oh, Jeremy darling, I do love you so."

That was how she put it—the way it all started.

I murdered Gregory Wellbright two weeks later. It was too simple; just as Anna said it would be when she planned it.

They had a regular box at the opera, but, for the evening in question, he'd told Anna well ahead of time that he wouldn't be going with her. Everyone interested in astronomy that night was committed to watching one of those comets that appear around once a century: It was scheduled to come into view just before ten o'clock. Gregory couldn't wait to watch it through his new telescope. Anna told him she'd take a girlfriend to the opera—except she took me instead.

The opera was at the Coliseum, in St. Martin's Lane. I met her there, at the foyer bar, where we shook hands formally under the approving eye of one of the barmen who knew both Anna and her husband by name. The box was one of the smaller ones, near the stage, on the top tier. Nobody could see into it beyond the very front, where Anna positioned her chair so that she was in full view of everyone. Before the performance, I stood beside her, ostentatiously chatting, as people in opera boxes do, but, just before the lights dimmed, I took a chair behind her so that I'd only be seen when I leaned forward—which I did, very occasionally. I stood up again when the lights came on for the first interval. Then, like most others, we went to the bar, before drifting down into the street to get some air. When the bell sounded for the second act, I didn't go back with her. In the crush, nobody would have noticed, or if anyone did, it would have been assumed I'd gone to the men's room en route to the box.

I had my new Honda parked around the corner in Charing Cross Road. It took me exactly nine minutes to get to the flat. Wellbright opened the street door to the block electronically as soon as I'd identified myself over the entry-phone.

"Sorry to disturb you, sir," I said as I came out of their private lift. It opened directly into the penthouse, and was programmed to serve only the top floor..

"That's all right. I'm waiting to see the comet. Anna's at the opera," he said. He had a large whisky in his hand.

"Actually, it's you I've come to see, sir. There's a share transfer form we need your signature on. It covers those electricity shares Mr. Trist sold for you last week. Should have been sent to you then. It'll save a day if I take it in with me tomorrow, and I knew I'd be passing here tonight." I pulled the transfer form from my pocket. It was a standard document that had to be signed by anyone disposing of shares. I'd seen

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

this one as I was leaving the office earlier. It had been filled in and was ready for posting to him. The woman clerk responsible had been pleased when I said I'd take it by hand. It wasn't especially urgent, but stockbrokers are always happy to save time over such things. I'd told the girl I'd be seeing Sir Gregory when I took Lady Wellbright home after the opera. Getting his signature had made a convincing reason for me to call on him now—better than the even more spurious one that Anna had concocted for me.

"Good of you to bother, Corbish," he said, taking the document and moving toward his desk. "Go and have a look through the telescope. The sky's perfect for viewing tonight. Want a drink?"

"No thanks, sir. I'm driving." It was a reflex response. I was still thinking he might be testing me for sobriety. More to the point, I didn't want to handle a glass, or anything else in the flat. Anna had cautioned me twice about not leaving fingerprints. And I was only too happy to be told to go out to the telescope. It was certainly a clear night, but cold outside—cold enough to justify my putting my gloves on again.

"No, you're looking in the wrong direction for the comet path," he said, almost testily, a few moments later when he joined me. "Not that it's due for another hour." He was holding a fresh drink as he elbowed me off the podium, then swung the telescope around more than a hundred degrees. He was in exactly the position I wanted—with his back to me and to the edge of the building. The way he was standing, the guardrail behind him hardly reached the top of his thighs. "Now we're all set up for the big event," he announced with poignant accuracy.

That was to be his last verbal utterance, except for an astonished grunt as, in one almost balletic movement, I grasped him around the waist, pitched him backwards over the side, and down into the service lane between the buildings. He was so surprised, he made no resistance at all. No one could see what happened: The block was several floors higher than neighbouring ones.

I left quickly. The bike was parked two turnings away to the south. I got back to St. Martin's Lane with time to spare. I sidled up to Anna again when she came outside, in the throng of people, at the start of the second interval. Then we went back in together and ordered drinks from the same barman who'd served us twice already.

At the end of the performance, we took a taxi to the flat, arriving there at eleven-fifteen. As we'd hoped and expected, there were police cars parked outside, plus an ambulance. Gregory's dead and grotesquely crumpled body had been found in the alley—though only twenty minutes before this—by someone walking his dog. After identifying Gregory's remains, Anna affected near hysterics very convincingly, and was put to bed by her doctor under sedation. I was interviewed later by the police, who, after inspecting the way the telescope was set up, seemed quite satisfied already that Gregory's death had been an accident. It helped that his shirt front reeked of the whisky that must have spilled on it when I heaved him over. They found the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

remains of his shattered glass on the roof beside the telescope. I was asked if he was a heavy drinker. I said I didn't know him well enough to give an opinion on that, while making it sound as if I was covering for him, protecting his reputation. It was later I remarked dejectedly that if it hadn't been for the comet, Sir Gregory would have been at the opera: that he had kindly invited me to accompany Lady Wellbright instead.

After that, it seemed all Anna and I had to do was wait on events like the postmortem, the inquest, the funeral, and her formally taking over the management of her late husband's estate. We knew there would have to be a further decent interval, of course, before we could come together in a relationship that would publicly be seen to blossom slowly into romance, but we were quite content to wait. Meantime, we'd planned that I should see her for business meetings only, and at the office—never at the flat—also that any telephone conversations would be for equally formal reasons. Naturally, though, I sent a letter of condolence to Anna.

At the inquest, the coroner returned a verdict of accidental death. I attended the funeral with Andrew Trist—but I sent my own wreath, which seemed right in the circumstances, and an expense well justified.

It was early on Saturday morning, ten days after the "tragedy," that I had an unannounced visit from the police at my own flat.

"Yes, there's just this one discrepancy, sir. We'd like to clear it up before we officially close the case," said the detective inspector, when I'd settled him, and the detective constable who came with him, in my only armchairs. "There was this share transfer form we found on Sir Gregory's desk. Can you tell us anything about it?" He took the form from his document case. It was in a transparent evidence bag.

I went cold all over. "Not from memory, no," I replied, looking perplexed, and playing for time. In my hurry to leave, I'd clean forgotten about the form. It had gone out of my mind, I suppose, because it hadn't featured in our original plan—Anna's original plan—which had been for me to turn up at the flat that night with a copy of a company annual report I was to say she'd requested. I'd never even mentioned the switch to her.

"Well that's strange, sir. We've spoken to the young lady who deals with such things at your office. She remembers your taking it from her Out tray on the Wednesday evening. You promised to get Sir Gregory to sign it when you took Lady Wellbright home after the opera."

"Did I?" I frowned, before letting comprehension dawn in my expression. "Yes, d'you know, I think I did. To be honest, Inspector, I was so shocked by Sir Gregory's accident that night, everything else seemed to go out of my head."

"I understand, sir. We wondered if, by any chance, you collected Lady Wellbright at the flat before you went to the opera?"

"No. No, we met at the Coliseum. At twenty to eight. There wouldn't have been time for me to go to their flat. I didn't get home to change till after seven." That at least was true, and I had my landlady as witness.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

In any case, I couldn't have risked a discrepancy in my story and Anna's at this point.

The inspector looked at his notebook. "Of course, that's right, sir. Lady Wellbright's confirmed the time and place of your meeting. That was when we saw her earlier this morning."

"Well, she would have done, yes," I said, assuming she hadn't rung to warn me because of what we'd agreed. "About the form," I added. "I seem to remember now, I just left it on the desk at the flat, Inspector, after I was interviewed by one of your colleagues. As I said, I was pretty shaken. Wasn't being especially rational, I expect."

"So you didn't perhaps leave the theatre during the performance to see Sir Gregory, sir?" the other, younger, and very boot-faced policeman asked suddenly. His tone was quite sharp.

"Of course not," I said. "Lady Wellbright will confirm that too, I'm sure."

My two visitors exchanged what could only be described as meaningful glances, and which I found distinctly unnerving.

"The thing is, sir," said the inspector, his brow creasing ominously, "if you didn't go to the flat before or during the performance, we don't understand how Sir Gregory got hold of the form which you were bringing to give him."

"I just told you," I replied, affecting tolerance not irritation, "I must have put it down on the desk without thinking." Then I took a calculated risk. "I mean, you're not telling me he'd signed it, because he couldn't have done." I had to know whether he'd done so or not, one way or the other.

I remember the inspector paused for what seemed an eternity before he answered quietly, "No, he hadn't signed it, sir."

So I was in the clear. Gregory had just put the thing on his desk, before going to freshen his drink. "Well, where's your problem?" I asked.

"It's more your problem, I think, sir," said the younger policeman. "You see, his fingerprints are on it."

I was tried four months later at the Old Bailey for the willful murder of Sir Gregory Wellbright. The case lasted four days—and I was acquitted. The jury didn't consider that the single thumbprint on the transfer form provided enough evidence for a conviction. So, I was lucky again.

Anna was never accused or arrested. When she'd been interviewed that same morning, I figured she must have panicked, saying she couldn't be absolutely positive I hadn't left the theatre and returned during one of the acts: She'd been so mesmerised by the performance, she might not have noticed my absence, although she was pretty sure I'd been there the whole time. I understood her caution, but when she later confirmed what she'd said in her deposition in court, I couldn't help thinking she'd overdone it a bit. I thought at the time that a more confident corroboration of my story would have been a lot more helpful.

Even so, there was no harm done in the end. The Crown Prosecutor

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

put a positive interpretation on Anna's prudent evidence, and I instructed my own counsel not to challenge it. For my own part, I simply insisted that I'd never left the theatre, and plenty of witnesses were produced to support me, including the barman. I thought, if the worst happened, it was better Anna stayed home and free than that both of us went to jail. That seemed to me to be the practical course, as well as—not to put too fine a point on it—the gentlemanly one for me to take.

My acquittal wasn't popular—especially not with the police. Without exposing themselves to libel actions, several newspapers got as near as they could to saying I'd been guilty. The innuendoes followed me everywhere I went. I tried toughing it out, especially at Sethick & Trist. Finally, though, I had to leave the firm because I just couldn't cope with the attitude toward me there any longer. Old Trist didn't attempt to stop me either.

I had kept clear of Anna, just as we'd agreed I would before I was accused. Of course, I realised that the "decent interval" would now need to be longer than we'd originally planned. I assumed she was still waiting for the time when we could come together as eagerly as I was. So you can imagine my shock when I read in *The Times* that she'd become engaged to Charles, her accountant—with his Cambridge degree and, as I'd heard, now a full partnership in his firm. He fitted Sir Gregory's specification perfectly, "Young now, but right for the big job when the time comes."

I risked telephoning Anna, saying I couldn't believe what I'd just read and begging her to meet me somewhere to talk things through. She was quite cool, and after saying how sorry she was that I'd been wrongly accused, regretted that there was really nothing more to talk about. She became a fraction more sympathetic when I explained my situation—being jobless and effectively unemployable, even though proved innocent. Despite her concern, though, she said she didn't know what she could do to help me.

So then I told her what she could do—marry me, and not Charles, or take some very awkward consequences. She immediately rang off.

Even so, I'd put the fear of God into her. Four days later, I received a registered letter from a lawyer in Zurich, enclosing a contract and another document. The contract specified that in view of the consequences I had suffered at being falsely accused of involvement in Sir Gregory Wellbright's accidental death, I was to receive forty thousand pounds a year for the rest of my life, but on condition that I made no further demands on Lady Wellbright. The money would be paid in monthly installments from a Cayman Islands trust fund. It would be tax free, provided I took up permanent domicile outside the UK before the first advance. This would be made a month after I had signed and returned the contract, and the testimony which accompanied it.

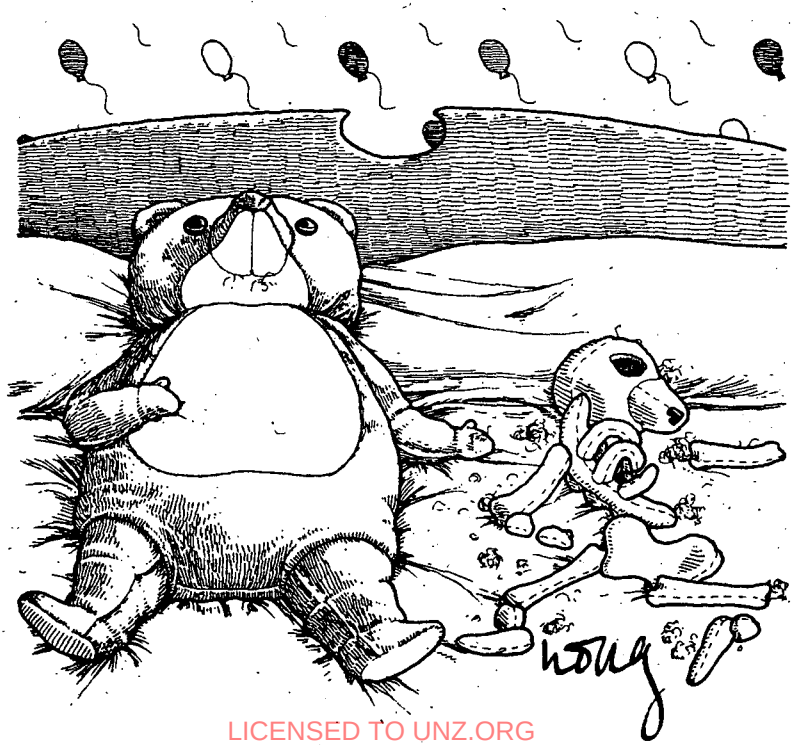
I had already digested the contents of the letter and the contract before I read the "testimony." It amounted to a confession that Sir Gregory and I had been involved in a drunken brawl on the penthouse roof,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

resulting in his accidentally falling to his death in the street. The brawl—over a disputed wager—had nothing to do with Lady Wellbright, who had not known about it and hadn't noticed my brief absence from the theatre either. Once signed, the contract and my testimony were to be kept under seal in the Swiss law company's strongbox, and would be destroyed following my death.

The significance of the forty thousand pounds a year did not escape me: It was to be our "divorce" settlement. It was the same amount as Anna had agreed with her late husband before they were married, only the circumstances were quite different, of course. I debated for some time whether I could risk signing the confession so that I could accept the demeaning offer. If I refused, there was a clear course open to me for getting my revenge which would put Anna behind bars, and possibly Charles with her. I was half sure, by then, that he'd been her lover throughout, and that I'd done their dirty work for them. But maddeningly, there was no way of my giving them away that didn't give me away as well—and there would be no permanent income for me when I came out of jail either. Of course, they knew that well enough.

Forty thousand pounds a year goes a long way in the Dominican Republic, where life has been quite bearable over the last twelve years. I don't need to work, and the people are very friendly, the women very beautiful. Whenever I'm depressed, I console myself that despite my failures in life, if they'd known the facts, my colonel, my father, and certainly old Trist would have agreed that in the matter of Anna Wellbright, I'd done the gentlemanly thing. ●



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE PATIENTS

by Seymour Shubin

Seymour Shubin's books have proved to have extraordinary longevity. In March of 1997, his first novel, originally released in 1953 by Simon & Schuster, hit the bookstores again under the imprint of Creative Arts Book Company. The author also has a new novel in production with Write Way Publishers, and more short stories in the pipeline. ✝

The Deans were a little surprised to find that they were living directly across the street, a narrow cobblestone street, almost an alley, from a psychiatrist. They knew from the sign on the door that a doctor, a Marian Bruder, M.D., had her office in that house, but they'd assumed she was—well, a regular doctor.

They'd only been living here two months. They had moved from the suburbs to this little townhouse because it was easier to keep up and they didn't have to drive anywhere—his eyes weren't all that good anymore and Alice had never been a confident driver. Here in center city they were able to walk to a nice park, a movie, food markets. Or at least they would be able to more freely once the winter was over. The cold was hard on both of them. He was seventy-one, with the usual mild arthritic aches. She was sixty-eight, with diabetes and assorted little ailments.

She was the one who learned about the psychiatrist.

"Bill, guess," and she told him what she'd just overheard during a brief excursion to the corner drugstore.

"Really?" Instinctively he bent over slightly to peer out one of the two living room windows that faced the street.

"I hope," she said with a laugh, "we don't get any crazies knocking on our door by mistake."

Actually they'd wondered what kind of doctor she was. Although they'd never paid particular attention, they couldn't help notice that she never seemed especially busy—once in a while someone would come up to the door, ring, and wait to be buzzed in. It was never one patient right after another, or enough at a time to fill a waiting room.

Now it all made sense. In fact, that same day they saw that patients showed up almost precisely at hourly intervals.

It wasn't that they just sat by the windows and *looked* and *waited.* Bill just happened to be sitting there and looked out when a patient

©1998 by Seymour Shubin

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

came walking up the street to the door, and for no reason at all, other than that he wanted to share this with her, he called to Alice in the kitchen, "Come here, will you?"

She came in, holding a dish towel and frowning, then leaned over to look. "He's a young fellow," she said, puzzled. "I wonder why in the world he'd need a psychiatrist."

"Who the hell knows," he said, shaking his head. They kept looking until the door opened and the young man disappeared inside.

"Huh." There was a touch of sadness in her voice as she straightened up slowly.

The next one, *she* saw and called to Bill as he was sweeping out the fireplace. "Here's one you've got to see."

He was a tall man, with a coat draped over his shoulders like a cape.

"You think?" she said.

"Think what?"

"You know."

The door opened, and as the man stepped in he gave someone in there a little wave.

"What do you mean?" Bill said. "A . . . homo?"

"I don't know," she said. "I would think."

"You can't jump to conclusions like that. I mean, a *coat.* Come on."

Bill lit a fire and sat by the window with the morning paper, which he hadn't finished yet. She came and sat with him in the facing wing chair by the other window. He found himself glancing out now and then, and once he saw her glancing out too. Then while they both were looking out, the man, wearing his coat now, walked out of the house. Soon afterward a young couple walked up and he rang the bell.

"Look at that," Alice said. "They're angry."

"How can you say that? How can you tell?"

"I don't know. Something about the way they're standing. Far apart. And look how they don't look at each other."

True, he thought. That seemed very true.

"How old do you think they are?" she asked.

"About thirty?"

"No more than that. Do you think they're married?" She couldn't see rings, they were wearing gloves.

"If they're angry," he said, "I guess they are."

"That's not funny," she said, glaring at him. "That's not funny at all."

They never saw Dr. Bruder or anyone else who lived there, a husband, children: no one, that is, who let themselves in with a key or came out with an air of belonging there. They wondered what she looked like, is she was youngish, old, if she really was more content than a lot of the people who came to her. Psychiatry had never been part of their lives, though they'd known a few people in the past, actually two, who'd gone to psychiatrists. It was all a little wierd to them, and while they could accept the fact that some were probably helped (though they never saw

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

any difference in their friends afterward, or even knew why they'd gone in the first place) they had the strong feeling that most people who went wouldn't really need it if they just put their minds to solving their problems. Who didn't have problems?

Though the Deans didn't spend a lot of time thinking of Dr. Bruder and her patients, it was a curiosity or, even more, a kind of entertainment that drew their attention at the oddest times. Like when they were watching TV, sitting completely away from the windows, one or the other of them would go over and peer out to see what was happening over there; or, suddenly remembering, they would lower the newspaper or magazine they were reading, even in the middle of an interesting piece, and glance over. And at times it would be just when someone was approaching the house or leaving or waiting for the door to open, and they'd be suddenly fixed, looking on.

"I wonder," she said once, "if any of them are actually really mentally ill."

It was something he had thought of now and then but had never said because he didn't want to cause her any concern.

"If you mean dangerous," he said, "no. Noo."

"Why're you so sure?"

"Come on. Because. You *see* them. They're all rich neurotics. That's who comes here."

She turned away from the window. "Look," she said then, looking at him, "you got food on your pants."

"Where? Where?"

"Right there. Near your fly. I told you to be careful."

It was two coffee-drop stains, from lunch. He made a feeble attempt to scratch them away with his thumbnail.

"Look," she said again, and this time he started to look at her angrily but then saw she meant out the window.

It was the couple. Though it was just as cold as the last time they were here, she didn't wear a hat or gloves today—she'd worn one of those colorful, tousled ski caps. She had, they could see now, short blond hair, and she definitely was wearing a wedding ring.

He was wearing a light raincoat, open to the cold. He stood at the top step and poked the bell, head down.

"She could be very pretty," Alice said.

"What do you mean 'could be'?"

"Could be. That's what I mean. She looks drained, haggard."

"I don't see that at all."

"You don't see it? It's so obvious. And just look at him. Look at the anger on his face, it's so clear. Look at the look he's giving her."

"I don't know."

"I'm amazed," she said after the couple had gone in. "I'm really amazed."

"At what?"

"That you couldn't see it. He has a very, very mean face."

Sheer nonsense, he thought. And it got him angry.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"How can you judge like that? When you don't know the first thing about him?"

"It's not a matter of judging. I can tell."

"You can tell, you can tell. It's not a matter of judging, but you can tell. And you're blaming her so-called haggard look on him, aren't you?"

"I wouldn't be surprised."

"You're always jumping to such fast conclusions. You've always been that way. And once you get something in your head," he said, gesturing, "nothing changes you."

"I just made a comment, a simple comment. I don't want to be attacked."

"Attacked? Attacked? You can criticize anyone but someone even vaguely says something you don't like, you're being attacked. You haven't changed one inch."

She stared at him, then whirled and went into the kitchen. He could hear water running in the sink, then the grinding of the garbage disposal. He tried to read, but it was hard concentrating. After a while he opened a magazine and managed to get himself into an article, but even then his eyes would lift every so often to the window. And one of the times was when the couple came out of the house.

They stood for a moment on the sidewalk, as though deciding where to go. Then they walked to the left, the direction they'd come from.

"Psychiatry," Alice said, "doesn't seem to have done *them* much good."

He hadn't even known she'd come back in the room. She was standing a few feet behind him but where she was still able to see across the street. His eyes followed the couple a little past the window frame. From the way they walked, each with their hands in their pockets, bodies angled a little away from each other, he'd have to guess she was right.

"I wonder if they have any children," he said.

"Huh," she grumped, and he immediately knew what that meant. Their Sam, their only child. Forty, and on his third marriage, and with children from two of them. He'd held a dozen jobs, but now, in his last letter, he claimed to have "found himself" in the ad business out in Seattle.

Still, Bill said, "What's that mean? The 'huh'?"

Instead of answering she went upstairs.

He sat half-turned on the chair, staring over at the staircase. It was a sore point, and she knew it. You always give in to that boy, she always said. Spoiled him. When it was exactly the opposite, she was the one.

He wanted to go over to the stairs and yell up at her. But he didn't. Didn't know what all he'd explode with, except he was sure he would start yelling about how he always used to work late hours all his life, always late and never at what he really wanted to do, and then was always trying to make up for the little time he had with Sam. Only she was always saying something like, "It's late, he's got to go to sleep," and years later she was the one, after they talked it over, and it was his idea, she was the one who couldn't wait to tell Sam first that they wanted to buy him a car.

Always a competition.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He tried to settle back in the chair. It was as though a cloud had filled the room, his lungs, and he couldn't get his heart to slow its racing.

Bill didn't want to look out there again, didn't want to see them anymore. He knew exactly when they came—Tuesdays, about a quarter of one—and for a few weeks he made it his business not to watch for them, though he noticed that Alice never missed. But then, on the fifth or sixth week, he was standing in the archway to the living room when Alice said, "Here come those two." And he came to the window, reluctant but as though succumbing to an addiction, and leaned forward to look.

"I'm telling you," Alice said, "they're wasting their money."

She was, he was afraid, right. It was still right there in their body language.

But whose damn fault was it? All the emphasis was on abused women. And it was easy enough to see a battered woman. But a man—he might not get physically beat up, though there had to be plenty of that too, but certainly emotionally beat up. But you never read much about that!

His heart was pumping hard.

All his life he could be beat up!

He eased himself down on the chair and sat there long after the couple was swallowed up in the house and Alice had gone upstairs. Then he put his hands over his face and began to rock.

Rock.

They didn't hear the shots. The first they heard was a low siren as a police car made its way slowly up the street. It brought the three of them to their feet. Dr. Bruder opened the door and they stood there staring out.

People were gathered out there, and more were running here.

Everett went back inside long enough to grab his and Donna's coats, then went out and stood at the fringe of the crowd.

That house, it's that house over there.

Couple lived there, they heard. Guy in his seventies, his wife close to it.

Nice, quiet couple.

And now the crowd was being ordered back by the police, but Everett and Donna could still hear drifts of stories. A murder-suicide, it seemed. She did it, then killed herself. No, he did it, then killed himself.

One or both of them must have been terribly sick.

God.

Donna looked at him. "Did you ever see them?"

He shook his head. "I don't think so."

"I didn't either, I didn't either." Then she said, her eyes closed, "I want to go home."

"Let me say goodbye to Dr. Bruder."

"Let's go. Please."

He put his arm around her as they walked, and she leaned her head against his shoulder. He took her hand and squeezed it tightly. They rubbed each other's hand as if feeling it for the first time. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Art by Laurie Harden

IF SERPENTS ENVIOUS

by Clayton Emery

Seagulls flapped and pecked around an iron cage hanging from a post. The gray-white birds were frustrated by something black that fouled their beaks. Joseph Fisher stopped and the birds flapped away. The cage was a gibbet. Propped inside was a dead man, neck elongated by hanging, body coated with tar. Joseph reached with a bony finger, touched a black foot. Tar pulled loose in a string.

"'Hurl'd headlong . . . to bottomless perdition, there to dwell in adamantine chains and penal fire, who durst defy th' Omnipotent to arms,'" murmured the student. Wiping his finger, he trudged into Newport. What the Narragansett Indians had called Aquidneck, "Isle of Peace."

The road was dusty and deeply rutted, almost impassible even dry, and wandered between stone walls and pastures and maple trees that nodded great green heads uneasily. Seeking food and escape from the blistering sun, Joseph aimed for the first store.

On a narrow porch of warped, unpainted boards blackened by salt hunched an Indian, face slack and cracked from drinking, in a filthy shirt with breechclout and leggins. At the feel of footsteps he extended a shaking hand, begging for anything but mostly rum. The stuporous

©1998 by Clayton Emery

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Indian blinked when the young white man addressed him in Algonquin tangy as pine sap. "Seek you the woods, brother, and drink the water that flows from the headlands."

The shop had two ends. The front, anchored to the road, bore farm implements—singletrees, harness, grain buckets, feedbags, horse liniments. The rear, hung over the harbor on pilings, with a dock below, contained chandler's supplies: boathooks, cordage, buckets of tar and oakum, fishhooks, oars. The store was hot; any loafers quickly dispersed. The lonely proprietor in a cocked hat and flour-dusty apron of green baize was braiding something from rope and codline. From a back pantry came the squawling of a baby.

"This story is based on an historical incident from Boston in 1755," writes author Clayton Emery, "in which a slave couple poisoned their master." The wife was burned at the stake, he says, and adds as an historical aside that *only* black slaves were ever burned in this country—"Contrary to popular belief, the Salem witches were hanged." Here, Mr. Emery's sleuth must prevent such dread punishment.

The storekeeper ran his eye over Joseph, peered into his pockets. The student was short and thin, shabby in a brown waistcoat and breeches with small pewter buttons, tattered hose, and broken shoes. A blanket roll and chunky satchel marked him as a traveler, yet he wore no hat and let his long brown hair fall free. His complexion was fish-belly white with deep-sunk, burning eyes. A man not long for the world, who sought day-old bread and green cheese that wept in the heat.

The student's money in the till, the shopkeeper talked as he knotted the codline. Where was Joseph from, where bound, what the news? Boston, just traveling, new blue laws heaped on sinful heads by the Massachusetts Legislature. Out loud, the Scottish Presbyterian thanked God he lived in godless Rhode Island.

Joseph munched bread and sipped cider. The baby screamed on and on, and he wondered idly where its mother had gone. Instead he asked what the storekeeper braided.

"Slave whip." Codline wrapped a rope handle that split into seven thick strands ending in overhand knots. The owner slapped the scarred counter like pistol shots. "Had three in stock and sold 'em this morning. The old sailor who made 'em took to selling 'em on the street, damn his eyes, so I must fashion my own. But t'ain't hard. Not fancy like a horse whip; you shouldn't never hit a horse hard. Just stiff enough to smart but not break the skin. Say, you wouldn't care to buy a baby?"

"A baby?" Joseph choked on crumbs, racking and hacking so badly the shopkeeper splashed rum into his cider from a jug under the counter.

"No charge. Here, I'll show you."

The shopkeeper fetched the shrilling infant, toting it by the ankles.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He spread a bloodstained butcher's sheet and laid out the child like a smoked ham. Naked and dusky, the boy had black hair flat and straight above a purple face. He clenched his fists and screamed.

"He's mostly Negro. Got some Indian in him, but that'll help him tolerate the winters. Good lungs, good grip, good size. Stick it on a wet nurse and in three, four years, it could help around the house and dooryard. Raise it right, don't spare the rod, and it'll suit better than any scrawny bound boy off the ship from London."

Numbly Joseph regarded the screaming infant. It kicked and thrashed, too young even to roll off the counter. "Where is its mother?"

The shopkeeper prevaricated, finally sighed. "In jail. She's to be burned at the stake tomorrow. That's her mate ripening out there." He nodded towards the distant gibbet. "That's why I'm stuck with this brat. Their goods was forfeit, and the mistress bade me take them all, including this'n. No one wants it, reckon it's bad luck. But I don't hold with that."

Joseph nodded absently. Only Negroes were burned at the stake, and he could guess the couple's crime. "They killed their master?"

"Aye. You must'a heard. They fed him a snake in his sleep. A timber rattler. Bit his insides and poisoned him. He screamed from dawn till dusk. But it's an ill wind. Lots of folks've never seen a burning, so they'll flock in from all over the colony. And everyone's beating their slaves for fear of an uprising, so I'm clean out of whips."

He had to speak over the baby's squawling. He tried slapping the child's face lightly, then harder to stun it, but the infant only howled louder. Finally he pulled the jug from under the counter, soaked a bar rag to squeeze rum into the baby's mouth. "Some Mother's Mercy might—"

His hand was arrested by Joseph's, slim and cold but surprisingly strong. "I'll buy the child."

"Well, now, that's mighty fine." A broad smile. "I'd say it's worth—"

"Two shillings."

"Oh no, I don't think so. A bonny bairn like this—"

"Two and six, and a swaddling cloth."

The shopkeeper shrugged in largesse and fetched a rag crusted with pine pitch and shavings. "You won't be sorry. Raise 'em right and they're loyal as puppies. I'm glad you took him. I'd'a strangled it for the dogs or pitched it off the wharf for the crabs." The shopkeeper wrapped the baby neatly and handed it to Joseph. "There, enjoy it. You're a good Christian, son."

"'Christ, conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary: suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried.'" But Joseph quoted in Aramaic, and the shopkeeper only looked puzzled.

Shouldering his blanket roll and book satchel, hugging the screaming baby to his chest, the student stepped into the hammer of summer sun. The wasted Indian by the door stuck out his palsied hand. Angry with the world, Joseph snapped, "Fly to the wilderness, far from this Gehenna, where backsliders sacrifice children to Moloch and Baal!"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Aware only that he got nothing, the Indian slouched against the wall. Joseph stalked into Newport. The child's crying brought seagulls keening overhead as if in sympathy, but in fact seeking a meal at the source of distress.

At the first stream that cut the road, Joseph squatted and dipped his finger. Immediately the child stopped bawling to suck. Spooning more, Joseph traced a cross on the child's forehead. "I never completed my studies, child, and am more French than English regarding baptism, but I reckon you need succor, spiritual and corporeal."

Thirst slaked, the child's hunger set it crying loud as before. The student tucked the baby close and steered down the widest street. Newport jammed a narrow spit jutting into Narragansett Bay, which itself was hemmed by bluffs of purple and red-gray granite before reaching the ocean in the south. Some hundred white gambrel roofs with barns made up the town. Warehouses encroached on the water, and half a hundred wharves pointed to a forest of masts in the harbor: sailing ships returned from Europe and the Caribbean and Africa, fishing smacks no bigger than a wagon. Heat made people veer for shade. Joseph hailed a black girl in a head scarf and patched apron who carried a basket of blue crabs. She told of a Negro wet nurse named Maroca who lived along Butcher's Brook.

Blanket and satchel chafed his sweaty shoulders and the baby cried in his ear as he made his way along the Sakonnet River. He found a rocky defile split by the brook, then a shack made from tarred and barnacled lumber salvaged from shipwrecks. A large black woman washed clothes in the stream while a brood of dark children worked in the shade or splashed in the brook.

The infant's crying made the woman abandon her washing. Her face stayed blank as a slate, but her yellow eyes quickened as she took the baby and tugged open her bodice. Joseph glimpsed a pink Y branded on her right breast as she cradled the child to nurse.

"You know this child?" asked Joseph.

"Yea, mon. He be the boy-child of Cuffy and Hazel, and an orphan both ways soon." Her voice dripped with molasses from the Sugar Islands. She wore a claret-colored skirt and bodice like any English woman, but a yellow turban covered her head above big gold hoop earrings. "How'd'joo get him?"

"I bought him for two shillings sixpence."

"Bought him? You be a bad bargainer, white man. Black babies dey give away like puppies. Store man should'a paid you to take him." Irony rang bitter. "Poor unfortunate, but not as unfortunate as his parents be."

"These parents who murdered their master by making him swallow a snake?"

"Yea, mon." The large woman swung towards her shack, the baby gurgling at her breast. "They ministered a snake to Marsa' Pearson, or snake poison. Caught red-handed. 'Course, she had good reason, de way

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

she was used so ill. But she'll return to Ahfrica soon, lay her burden down."

Joseph trailed her across the river-rounded rocks of the defile. "When she dies, you mean."

"Yea, mon. Cuffy, don't know where he'll end up, but it be to glory somewhere. He was a gen'le man and no two ways 'bout it. 'Course, no one knows de human heart. I can't keeps dis child, you knows."

"Eh?" Shuffling ideas in his head, Joseph found himself surrounded by children with brown-white features and kinky red-brown hair. "No, I expect you can't."

The shack had no windows. Summer glare through the doorway showed a room fitted like a ship's forecastle with bunks along the walls and a table that hinged down. The floor was dirt strewn with cattails. Nursing with one arm, Maroca shooed children hither and thither to wash their hands, sweep the table, lay out wooden bowls and spoons.

"I'se a free woman. My husband's white. He sails on de slavers. He fancied me and bought me. My chillun was born free, and we'll stay that way, long's we stay close to home where ever'body knows us. We journeys elsewhere, we likely collect a chain on our laig." Introduced, she fixed Joseph with bulging yellow eyes.

"Um, I am called Joseph Fisher. I was captured young in the late war†, raised by Penobscots, trained by Jesuits in Quebec. Peace returned me to the English sphere, and they sent me to Harvard to be a missionary to Indians. Lately I . . . wander."

"I'm not surprised," Maroca snorted. "You been blown 'bout so much, you almost a black white man. 'Stead's you red and white. You ever think dem Penobscots what raised you might'a killed your folks?"

A boy fished in Joseph's pockets, caught a rap on the skull from his mother. "I have meditated upon that. But I was young and they were kind. They called me Monminowis, Silver Cat."

"I call you to supper. You care for one of ours, you share our food." Maroca nodded to the table. The children hopped to their places, packed as herring, hands clasped, eager to see Grace done. "And since you comes from Hahvard, you say de blessing."

There was only fishhead chowder, pickled sorrel, and ship's biscuit. As the children devoured their portions, Joseph settled for a biscuit and spring water. Maroca nursed the child, which wouldn't get a proper name until its first birthday: it was just "the baby." Supper was quiet, the children shy before a stranger. Joseph absently gazed about the room. A fat-bellied grotesque on a shelf was adorned with chicken feathers: a voodoo fetish.

Abruptly Joseph said, "Do you believe a man could be forced to swallow a snake?"

Maroca's thoughts and emotions were sealed like brandy in a dark brown bottle, but she shrugged. "De man died. He was all swoll up, dey said, like when you gets bit. And he screamed 'bout snakes, and tried to

† The first French & Indian war, King William's War of 1689-1697

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

claw his own belly open till they had to tie his han's. Dere's timber rattlers here'bouts. Men'll dig a cellar, come back de next day, de hole swarmin' wid 'em, have to kill dem with shovels. You should have a snake charm you'self. Hang four buttons around your neck, ward off de consumption."

Joseph nodded, half hearing. "Did anyone actually *see* the snake? Did anyone think to—open him?"

Even Maroca, who'd seen everything, blinked at the idea of dissection. But she nodded. "Dere was a snake. De mistress seen Cuffy wid it in his own han'." Sweat ran off her round face in the evening heat, the droplets splashing the baby's flat black hair.

"'Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen,' " Joseph murmured. "Do you know aught of the murdered man?"

Another shrug of round black shoulders. "Marsa' Pearson was a merchant-man. Dey's the richest in Newpoht. Owns a fine house and warehouse and ships and docks and six slaves—four now. His ships travel all over de world, dey say. Includin' Gambia." In the six years since the British Parliament had legalized the slave trade, Newport had boomed. Gambia on the Ivory Coast was its chief port of call.

"So a man who lived by slavery died by it, eh?"

"Mebbe so. But Cuffy, he was a gen'le man, good in the heart. He plied cures on all de colored folk here'bouts. Learned dem from his mother. But I don't wants to be talkin' about de dead. Nor 'bout Hazel, neither, poh thing. And poh thing you." She bobbed the near-orphan at her breast.

"Hazel . . ." Joseph pictured a slave woman alone in an oven-hot cell, fearing the flames that would lick her thighs the next day. "Has a minister attended her?"

"No minister for colored folk. We stand at the back of the church, behind a curtain, is all."

Suddenly animated, Joseph reached for his clumsy satchel, extracted a King James Bible, its black leather cover worn white. "'There is no salvation outside the church.' Will someone show me the jail, please?"

Maroca ducked her head to peer out the door. "Evenin' comin' on."

"I thought you were freemen." Slaves were not allowed out after dark, Joseph knew.

"Freedom's for white folk, and not all of dem."

"I'll show you. I can help." The eldest, a womanly girl, Quamino spoke with only a trace of brown sugar. Her mother opened her mouth to object, then sighed and nodded.

Toting his heavy Bible, Joseph stroked the baby's head for luck. Black girl and white man passed into the gathering gloom.

At the last corner, Quamino hung back in the shadows, so Joseph went on alone. Newport's jail was near the waterfront, handy for rowdy sailors or captive pirates. The old wooden building tilted alarmingly over the street. A torch-lit crowd watched the oak-barred windows of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the second floor for a glimpse of the murderess. All were white, many drunk, faces sweat-shiny under tricorn hats and mob caps. "We'll burn your hide blacker tomorrow, witch!" "Fat's gonna be in the fire!" "Stuff an apple in your mouth before the pig roast!"

Parting the crowd, Bible in hand, Joseph glided nose-high towards the jail like a Harvard don. Not recognizing him, the crowd nudged one another. Ducking inside the cockeyed doorway, the student almost collided with a jail keeper and two lackeys who crowded a small stifling hall. The keeper of the keys perched on a three-legged stool with a noggin of ale. Obviously they guarded against the villainess being seized and lynched before her appointed time—and a proper crowd.

The jail keeper barked blearily, "What the hell are you about? Get out!"

The two lackeys unfolded arms and iron-tipped batons, but Joseph stood firm with the Bible in his hands. "I would see the slave woman Hazel. Despite her heinous crime, she has yet a chance to enter into a personal covenant with God, to grasp at the keys to the kingdom of Heaven. To save her soul."

The lackeys looked to their boss, who stared at Joseph. "Uh . . . She ain't allowed any visitors. Besides, blacks ain't got no souls. They're animals, like."

Pompously, Joseph snapped open the Bible where his finger marked. "You would block God's work? You would *contradict* the Bible, breathed by God, therefore infallible and stamped with God's own authority? Consider the parable of the sheep and the goats. 'I was in *prison,* and ye came unto *me.* And the King shall answer, inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of my brethren, ye have done it unto me.' Else, 'Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels. *Everlasting* punishment!'"

Threats of doom made the tipsy jail keeper squirm. "All right. T'ain't no harm, I suppose. Take him up, John, but watch him. Don't let 'im slip her a knife to end it early." Joseph fought down a grin as he marched up the lopsided stairs.

The second floor had four cells with stout oak doors broken by thick slats. In the last cell huddled a black figure wrapped in a bodice and gown so faded they had no color at all. African-black, the woman's skin glistened like an oiled whetstone in the heat, yet she shivered uncontrollably as she rocked on her knees. Bloodshot eyes, stark white in her black face, stared at the corner.

Joseph leaned on the oaken bars. "Hazel. Child." He called her name repeatedly without result. "Hazel, please listen. Your baby is safe. He's with Maroca. She'll care for him."

The white eyes flickered, and Joseph pressed. "Hazel, for the sake of your child, can you tell me why—your husband—had the snake? What did he intend with it? He was a gentle man, we know, and wouldn't kill Master Pearson. But what was the snake for?"

Hazel whispered, a shuddery hiss like a teakettle come to a boil. "Cuffy, he—he had a dream. 'Bout a snake. A snake read his—heart.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Snake tole him, someone'd kill him. *Did* kill him . . ." Choking on sobs, she curled into a black ball of misery.

"Dreamt of a snake?" Joseph was electrified. He called, "Bear up, Hazel. God is many things, but above all, love, patience, and mercy."

He barely heard the turnkey's order to leave, or the crowd's questions. He walked into the hot night in a daze, muttering, "The baby has straight hair. *Straight* hair."

Quamino hissed and he slipped into an alley beside her. "Why didn't you tell me Cuffy had Indian blood?" In his excitement, he named the dead man.

He felt the girl shrug. "He didn't look it, hardly. His mama was a red woman."

"It shows in his child. One-quarter Indian, it has lank hair, not kinked like an African's. I couldn't see the dead man's features for the tar, yet the storekeeper mentioned it. . . . Can you show me Master Pearson's house, please?"

The girl squeaked. "That's a hoodoo place! Mama said Mars'er Pearson's death'll fetch all his slaves with him. Like the cannibal kings in Dahomey what files their teeth and takes a thousand slaves to their graves. What d'you want there?"

"I want to rifle a king's midden."

It felt strange to Joseph, a child of two cultures, to see through the eyes of a third, the African slaves of New England who remained unseen until summoned. For instead of walking the thoroughfare, Quamino led a torturous path through dooryards and gardens that reeked of garbage and privies and apple trees that gave off a winey perfume in the summer night. The third time Joseph tripped over a sleeping pig, he opined, "I dislike this. Pigs have a passion for snakes." Quamino said nothing, though her white eyes were large and luminous.

Threading apple trees and gardens and outbuildings, she approached the back of a tall square mansion, pressed her ear to a window, rapped an erratic tattoo.

A bar slid aside, and a young black in a shirt and bony knees stuck his head out. He'd obviously been sleeping on a pallet in the corner. "Quammy! What 'choo doing here? You wanna—eh?" He froze upon spotting Joseph's wan face, skeletal in the summer night.

"Hush up, Prosper! This here Indian gots a order for you! So you do it or he'll tomahawk that woolly poll a'yours and hang it for the crows to peck! Fetch the spade you uses to turn the midden! Gittup!"

Agitated, Prosper blundered down the stairs, remembered he wore only a shirt, stumbled back and grabbed his shabby breeches and ancient shoes, fumbled into the barn where horses nickered. Fetching a punched-tin lantern and a spade, he threaded a small orchard. Silky leaves rustled at either hand.

Prosper moaned, "I din't wish you'd make me work the night long too,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Quammy. I works enough durin' the day. At night, I'd a thought you'd come for somethin' else."

"Day I needs what you gimme is the day I die," snapped the girl. "Hush up."

The back of the property was screened by a woven-wicker fence. Prosper stopped at a baulk of half-rotten timber and thumped his shovel on it. Quamino slapped his shoulder for silence. The girl struck the candle alight, then lifted her skirt and set the lantern between her ankles to obscure the glow. The silhouette of her legs and hips distracted the men, but Joseph tipped up the flat cover of wood. A sour reek fermented by summer sun gushed up in a wave.

Gasping, Joseph asked, "Why this baulk?"

"Mistress don't like pigs in the garbage, not hers nor nobody else's. Say if she's eat pork, she'll know what the pig's et first. Our pigs stays in the crib. Eat better'n me, most days."

"Serves you right for wasting your substance with riotous living, and devouring thy living with harlots," quipped Joseph. Prosper just stared at the cadaverous white man who came in the dark to pick at rubbish. "Tell me. Have you seen a dead snake in the past days?"

"'Twas a snake killed Master Pearson," whispered the boy.

"If so, and I doubt it, *that* snake was interred with Master Pearson." Since ashes went into a hopper for potash, vegetable and table scraps to the pigs, and bones to the dogs, the trash was mostly dried stalks and fish bones and lobster shells. And fragments of glass, expensively cut. "What is this crystal?"

"Master Pearson took sick at the table. He fell out of his chair, kicking and yelling and clawing his belly. He pulled down the tablecloth and broke some goblets. I would'a got whupped for it, 'cause I sets the table, but Mistress Pearson was so upset I din't. I's always getting whupped for no reason a'tall."

"You hush up or I'll flatten your thick head with that spade," spat Quamino. "I never saw such a whiney—"

"Eureka!" Joseph's hand stabbed down, plucked up a snake. Scarcely a foot long, dark green with long yellow stripes, lacking a head, it resembled a thick bracelet. "Cuffy discarded this, didn't he?"

Prosper shook. "I dunno, I dunno. He catched it in the garden, under the hubbard squash—"

"After your master took sick, no?" Excited, Joseph's French intruded. "He plied this snake on Master Pearson—"

"No sir! Beg pardon, but he plied it to *hisself!* 'Twas *t'other* snake he voodooed on Mas'er Pearson!"

"What? What other snake?" Joseph's deep-sunk eyes glittered like a skull on a spike. "No, there couldn't be another snake."

"There was! I seen it! Cuffy took sick, and he catched that snake and drank the blood!"

Now everyone was confused. Joseph persisted, "No, he gave the blood to Master Pearson!"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"No, he drunk it hisself! He was crazy! I stayed clear'a him!"

"Oh!" Quamino blinked. "He's right! Cuffy came to see my mama! He had the stomach cramps, and she dosed him with hellebore. He puked the night long, kep' all the chillun awake!"

"*Cuffy* took sick? When was this?"

Quamino didn't hesitate. Reared in oral tradition, Africans had phenomenal memories. "Monday last, day after meetin'."

Joseph rolled the flaccid snake in his fingers as if hunting a hidden message. "But this is fresh, a day or two. So there *must* be two snakes . . . Hazel could attest, but . . . Oh Lord, I see! Cuffy was seen bleeding a snake, and someone assumed he poisoned the master *with* the snake!"

"Tha's what happened, master, 'xactly!" breathed Prosper. "Mistress seen the snake in Cuffy's hand and screamed to wake the dead! She were screaming, crying Cuffy had to get out, then she flung herself out the door with the chillun afore her! Us slaves was huddling close, trying not to get whipped! Sheriff's men came and they beat Cuffy so bad he couldn't stand, and when he tried to talk they smashed his mouth with clubs! And Hazel they kicked in the stummick, and tooken her babe away and her shriekin'—" The boy stopped, his voice shuddery.

"Fie on people with short sight!" rasped Joseph. "But if Cuffy . . . How . . . ?"

Unknowingly, Joseph stroked his chin with the dead garter snake. He hunkered, silent, so long that Quamino gave an experimental push to his shoulder. Roused, he shielded his eyes from the lantern light and looked east. "Dawn not two hours off, and Hazel to be burned at noon." Coiling the dead snake in his coat pocket, he took the lantern.

Prosper tipped the baulk over the midden. "Please don't tell no one I was out here, sir. The mistress, she'd have the bulls take off my hide a strip at a time—"

Quamino chopped the air, imitating a tomahawk. Prosper peeked at Joseph's back and felt his head. "Scalped, whipped, an' all. Be lucky if'n I don't go to the stake 'longside poor Hazel too."

Trinity Church perched on a hill that it might overlook Newport. Behind it stood the parsonage, a solid, fresh-painted, proud building connoting the congregation had money to spend. Joseph found the church empty, the front door of the parsonage unresponsive, the kitchen open to the morning heat. In the backyard a black woman plied a long-handled paddle to turn baking bread in a beehive oven. Joseph waited patiently by the picket fence. There was no sea wind this morning, and heat lay like a wool blanket higher than his head. Still, rather than clog his lungs with consumption, as was thought hereabouts, the warm salt air seemed to bake his lungs and clear the phlegm, as water is baked from a clay jug by a kiln. Yet Joseph had been up all night, pacing and thinking, and felt tired both inside and out.

His reverie was interrupted by a brusque, "What do you want?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The slave flung the picket gate open as if to bat Joseph away. Her dark eyes ranged over his shabby clothes and shoes, marked him for a mechanic or beggar, and a diseased one at that.

But Joseph introduced himself as a divinity student to see the parson. "Please. Maroca thought I should pay him a visit."

"You know Maroca?" No trace of African or Caribbean accent here: a blind man would think her an English housewife born in Sussex.

"Yes. I'm a guest in her house."

That raised an eyebrow. "How's her son faring?"

"You mean Zingo, with the cast in one eye? He's been croupey all week, but dosings of sweet-fern tea have tamed it."

"That's good." Warming, the woman started over. "Reverend and Mistress Treat attend a gentleman who only takes callers in the morning. From four to eight. They'll return soon. You're welcome to await them. I can feed you."

"That's most gracious of you." Ten minutes later Joseph was seated at the kitchen table, and heaped before him was ham, hasty pudding with maple syrup, pickled cabbage, baked beans, cranberry tarts. Satisfied with Joseph's identification of himself as an upright member of the lowest class, the slave gossiped as if they were old friends. Her name was Jin, "like an old she-mule." Inevitably she came to the morbid death of Master Francis Pearson from swallowing a snake. Although her talk circled around blame, Joseph understood Master Pearson had been a cruel and callous man, and it was high time someone murdered him. But to see poor Cuffy, the kindest colored man in Newport, hanging as crowbait, and to think of "poor suffering Hazel" going into flames at midday was a shame. Even as she talked, the woman packed a basket: a picnic for a burning.

Time slipping away made Joseph fidgety. He interjected, "I've heard it said time and again that poor Hazel was misused, but—"

A voice caroled from the front of the house and Jin hustled Joseph through a closed door into a space smelling of book leather and ink. It gave him a flutter of nostalgia, and a wish to be somewhere else, if only he knew where.

The parson was a dark-browed thick-haired man not much older than Joseph, his wife a plain thing in a gown and bodice of burgundy and a sunbonnet with a matching ribbon: clothes considered scandalous in Boston were demure in free-and-easy Newport. Both frowned at the shabby guest.

"A divinity student, eh? Belike." The young parson still aped the pedantic speech of his teachers. In Latin he quoted, "'Of making many books there is no end: Much study is a weariness of the flesh.'"

Joseph completed the passage in the same language. "'Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.'"

The young man's face lit up, banishing his feigned dotage as if throwing off a heavy cloak. Plunking his fellow scholar in his study, Reverend

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Treat called for wine and water. As Jin delivered and left, the reverend said, "I don't hold with slavery, myself, but, uh, Jin came with the house." Out in the hall, the slave woman snorted.

The reverend poured Joseph madeira, red wine from Portugal, then offered well water after local custom. Joseph took more water than wine: He needed a clear head. Coming out of heat and a dusty road, the minister gulped his portion and poured more. "So, Joseph, what brings you to 'Rogue's Island'? Have you lost your faith? Reverend Doctor Mather tells us, 'If a man were to lose his religion, he'd be sure to find it in Newport.'" He chuckled.

Joseph did not. Time flew. "Reverend, I've come about this burning."

The man's enthusiasm slipped. "Ah, yes, a dolorous business. I'm opposed to burning, myself. An invention of Catholics and Episcopalians. Hanging is quicker and less messy. But the gentry are set on a gruesome punishment to deter other slaves from considering assassination. There's no way I can intervene. It wouldn't be, uh, prudent." Not for an upstart paid by the congregation.

"But suppose she's innocent, and Cuffy were too? You could intercede then, surely."

"Well, uh, surely there's no way to prove her innocence. Cuffy was found, uh, administering a snake to the, uh, deceased."

To the reverend's amazement, Joseph pulled a headless snake from his pocket. "I found this. A garter snake, entirely harmless. They don't even have teeth, but crunch crickets and spiders. Cuffy was half-Indian, I've learned. Half Wampanoag. He spoke the words of Passaconaway, an Indian *powahee,* a prophet of the last century, who made snow burn and trees dance. Passaconaway said that a snake can read your heart, and see the future, and know if an enemy conspires to kill you."

"God cursed the snake," interrupted the parson. "Genesis three-fourteen."

"Nonetheless, Indians revere snakes. Mohawks consider At-o-sis the mother of their race. Snake blood is a nostrum for women in childbirth; even a spoonful will deliver a healthy baby in a trice. Cuffy learned the cure from his mother, and tried to administer the potion to Master Pearson. He'd tried to cure himself of a stomach ailment just the week before. But the woman of the house saw the snake and concluded Pearson died of snake poisoning, or ingesting a snake even."

"He died in agony, screaming. The venom—"

Joseph shook his head, made his brown hair ripple. "Only pit vipers have venom, only timber rattlers around here. Garter snakes have none."

"Then what killed him?"

"Some other poison, I suspect. I don't know which. There are so many."

"An Indian root? One Cuffy might know?"

Joseph shrugged like a Frenchman. "There are roots will sicken a man, but few that kill. Snakeroot from the Carolinas is so potent that should a cow eat it, children can die drinking her milk. But Master

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Pearson might have had a crab† in his stomach, too. Whatever the cause, a physician should have found it. And given that Cuffy tried to *cure* his master, we must err with mercy."

"Negroes are notorious poisoners," Treat insisted. "Everyone here in Newport is careful. They make the slaves eat from the pot first. Masters hold the cellar keys and open their own bottles."

For answer, Joseph held up his goblet. Treat reached to pour more wine, then got the message. "Oh. Yes, I see. . . . But Jin has served this parsonage since she was a girl, and . . ." He set down his goblet carefully. "I suppose we better talk to the sheriff. He oversees the execution, but the Pearsons pay the piper, so they call the tune. Yes, I suppose we best see the Pearsons." He sighed at the prospect of disrupting his parishioners—and employers.

The Pearson family, friends, and parlor were draped in black for mourning. Joseph thought they looked more like Quakers than the normally gay citizens of sinful Newport, yet an incongruous festive air permeated the crowd, for outside Negroes waited with carriages to ferry them to the field where Hazel would be burned.

Reverend Treat was welcomed quietly, shaking hands all around. People peered at moth-eaten Joseph, "a traveling divinity student." The white Indian glimpsed a black face at the kitchen door: Prosper, wide-eyed and appalled that someone who associated with servants should be received cordially in the parlor.

Joseph accepted more madeira with water while the Pearsons took theirs straight from deep goblets. Mistress Pearson—so far not "Widow"—bore finery and a plumpness that bespoke a rich merchant's wife. Pearson brothers George and Chad matched a black-draped portrait of the late Francis: a curly head, lips like a mink trap. John Williams was Pearson's business partner. Despite open windows and high ceilings, the room was roasting.

The Reverend Treat, having again donned his elderly persona, made consoling noises. "Gone to God . . . In the bosom of the Lord . . ." Joseph fidgeted. In an hour Hazel would be tied to a stake and committed to flames while all of Newport bore witness. The student had come to beg a stay of execution, but was unsure how to begin—especially since he'd need to accuse someone else of murder.

Wine-sodden talk buzzed angrily. All present were slave owners. "Burning's the best thing we can do! Put the fear of God into 'em!" "We've been too sparin' of the whip hand and now Francis's paid for it!" "Too familiar, that's what they're getting!"

"But what if Hazel's not guilty?"

Joseph's mild outburst stunned the room. Wine sloshed in goblets as all eyes turned. Reverend Treat sidled away as if from contagion.

"Why," blistered Mistress Pearson, "would you think her innocent? She's a slut! A filthy lying trollop who deserves to die!"

† Cancer

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You must be mad to come here and insult us so!" chorused a brother. "Treat, who is this dimwit?"

"Negroes are notorious poisoners!" added another brother. "There's none we trust with our lives!"

"Even if she were innocent, it's time we burned a black to teach the others a lesson!"

Amidst a hail of angry remarks, a heavy hand clamped around Joseph's elbow. The sheriff hoicked the student from the room as if gigging a frog, towed him across the kitchen, and pitched him down the back stairs. Joseph clambered up, shedding dirt and clam-shell crumbs, only to receive a jab in the belly from an iron-shod baton that doubled him over, set him coughing.

"I'm warning you out, rascal! Hie back to Massachusetts and your tight-arse Puritans! Now get!" A rap on Joseph's elbow sent electric pain rippling up and down his arm. Joseph was dragged to the street, obviously to be frog-marched clear to the town limits and flung over the line.

Yet rounding the corner, they almost collided with Reverend Treat, who stumbled down the front steps, apologies spilling from his lips. Prosper slammed the front doors. The stunned Treat whirled as Joseph gasped, "I'm a guest—of the reverend."

The sheriff halted at Joseph's rapid rise in status. "Is 'at true, sir?"

"No!" snapped Treat. "Oh, dash it all, yes. I brought him. I'll be responsible." The sheriff reluctantly ceded control of the miscreant, but added that his orders still applied.

Joseph stumbled after Treat, who flipped his hand as if to banish the Devil. "Why, why, *why* did you say that? Why intimate that Cuffy and Hazel don't deserve to die? You can't imagine the ruckus you've stirred up! You dandiprat! You hog-rubber! Those people trusted me, and there you jabber like a Barbary ape! How *dare* you—"

"I *dare,*" Joseph rubbed his stomach, "because Cuffy was innocent of any crime and Hazel is *still!* Yet these mugwumps will see her burned to death, shrieking to Almighty God, because it's *convenient* to punish her! 'The judge is condemned when the criminal is absolved!' " The last in Latin.

"*There's* your downfall!" retorted the reverend. "Steeping your mind in classics, clouding your judgment with pagan passions when you should study Holy Writ instead!"

"'Out of thine own mouth will I judge thee' then! 'They sold the righteous for silver, and the poor for a pair of shoes!' 'The faces of all of them gather blackness!' '*Thou* art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men!'" He had to stop, out of breath.

"'Judge not according to appearance!'" Then a sneer. "'Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world!'"

"'For I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; *and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings!*' "

Treat merely stamped harder down the dusty road. Joseph stumped alongside, alternately rubbing his stomach and elbow. After they'd gone

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a hundred yards, the student asked quietly, "'Can two walk together, except they are agreed?'"

"I don't know what you expect of me!" rapped the preacher. "Or God either! You should be gone hence! You're not wanted!"

"I'll go an hour after midday. I'll go then as did Lot. Nor shall I look back."

Treat stopped dead in the middle of the road and glared at Joseph. But the student's pale, hollow-eyed stare was like something dead, and the parson looked away. In the silence came a foot-slapping, a man half-trotting to catch up. Chad Pearson, the dead man's brother. "Hold up! Reverend, you!"

The two clergymen waited in the hot dusty street while Chad Pearson clopped to a stop. Yet, having caught up, the man only hemmed and loosened his stock. "I, uh, wanted to say. This, uh, whole affair. It's deuced bad."

Joseph waited, staring, as did Treat.

Reddening, and not from heat, Pearson went on. "Um, I'm sorry you were ejected that way. We don't usually have the sheriff in—"

"Why does Mistress Pearson hate Hazel so?" shot Joseph.

"Oh, uh. You can't believe everything she says. You know how women are. . . ."

"Why?"

Treat cleared his throat. "There's no need to be rude."

Chad Pearson looked up and down the street. "It's damned difficult to explain. It's easier if you're drunk. It's just that, well, sister didn't like having Hazel around—Hey!"

Joseph grabbed the man by the lapels, and only Treat's imploring hands kept Chad Pearson from being rattled like a dice cup. The student rapped, "Tell me and be quick!"

"All right!" Chad backstepped, smoothed his coat. "Francis would—We'd be drinking and he'd—spice up the betting. George and I don't have any slave women, you see. No good-looking ones, anyway. So he'd, uh, bet her—"

Joseph chopped off his maundering. "You'd hand her around the table. Whoever trumped slept with her."

Chad turned redder. Joseph whirled to Reverend Treat. "Why didn't you tell me this?"

"I didn't know! That's not the sort of thing they'd tell a minister! Sometimes I don't know anything my parishioners are doing!"

"'Haste thee, escape thither,'" quoted Joseph. "Sodom and Gomorrah are rebuilt in the new Israel, and not even Lot's family shall escape this time. . . .' This news wounds our cause. What could Cuffy think seeing his wife steered to bed at the behest of his master? It's enough to kill for. How know his child is even of his blood?"

"He couldn't complain much," insisted Chad Pearson. "Francis gave Hazel to him for a wife, bought her special. Cuffy should have been grateful . . ." His voice trailed off at Joseph's black look.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Growling, the student went on. "Worse yet. Hazel herself might have poisoned her master. But so could any of you Pearsons be guilty."

"What?"

"All of you stand to inherit, and anyone could have poisoned his food or spirits! And his partner too . . . ! Wait. You import slaves from the Sugar Islands, yes? And own ships, and warehouses? Ships in tropical waters suffer from toredo worms, do they not? The warehouse, have you the keys? Good!"

Bedazzled by this babble, Pearson and Treat were taken in tow as Joseph plowed like a frigate under full sail for the docks.

Chad Pearson fumbled to unlock the side door of the warehouse. Seagulls banked and keened, hungry for scraps, but the wharfs were oddly deserted, for most everyone had trekked to the burning field. As Joseph waited, he noticed tucked behind a narrow two-story building of stone with iron-barred windows the slave hut into which "black gold" was herded by midnight moons. He shook his head, tried to ignore the sun striking his shoulders, the ache in his skull.

It was no relief to step into the stifling warehouse. Among crates and bolts of cloth stood pyramids of small casks, called butts, branded in Portugese. The hot air reeked of wine and spices and tar and cedar and turpentine.

Joseph stopped short. "Wine. The best way to introduce the stuff. Yes . . . We know the wine was adulterated because Cuffy fell victim also."

"We do?" asked Pearson and Treat. "He did?"

"Yes. A week before Francis Pearson died, Cuffy suffered a stomach ailment that he tried to treat with his own snake potion, then Maroca's potions. Nothing worked—a potion can't undo poison—but he recovered. From this we infer that one of those times when Master Pearson had been dosed, Cuffy, in clearing the table, drained Pearson's glass; all servants will when they can. He got the poison intended for Pearson; the stuff is heavy and it sinks."

"But Francis didn't drink that much madeira because of his gout," insisted Chad. "He took it with water always."

"Wait. What stuff?" asked Reverend Treat. "What was used?"

"I'll show you. Where is your paint locker?"

The paint locker jutted under the eaves of an addition, with a boarded wall and door that could shut and lock, though no lock was in sight. Joseph stepped into the sharp stink of turpentine. By the light of a tiny window he hunted, under a table found a small cask with a wooden cover. Lifting the cover, he showed them a gray-white powder and a wooden scoop.

"This stuff. Arsenic." Joseph took down a dry paint pot and scooped. "It's used to kill pigs and rats, but is also mixed into red-lead bottom paint to kill toredo worms that riddle hulls so fiercely in the Caribbean, even white oak. There's enough arsenic here to kill half of Newport."

"What?" Brushed by death, Chad Pearson touched his breast.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Treat shook his dark head. "It makes no sense. Only Master Pearson was poisoned, but everyone drank madeira and other wines. You haven't been troubled by stomach cramps, have you, Chad?"

"What? No, never!" The man felt his throat now.

"Perhaps it was intended that the whole family succumb, and something went wrong. Perhaps everyone else was immune," Joseph mused, not believing it himself.

Abruptly he turned to a pyramid of casks, grabbed up a cracked one that had leaked its contents. Joseph rapped a knuckle on the oak bung, peered inside at the wider end. "These bungs are hammered from the inside, then the casks are filled and sealed in the Canary Islands. When broached, the bung falls inside the cask. I see no way a man could remove a bung, poison the wine, then replace it. It would be impossible to tamper with these casks and not have someone notice."

"Of course not," snapped Chad Pearson. Fright was giving way to anger. "But someone did poison my brother, you say. Who? How?"

Joseph paced, passing the pot of arsenic from hand to hand, juggling possibilities in his head until he was dizzy. The oven-heat of the warehouse made him dizzy too, and he stepped outside. The sun was like a hammer, so he moved against the building. The shady strip was a popular place this blistering summer, and posted along the wooden wall were notices announcing auctions or the sale of pirated goods.

Unintentionally, the student read the broadsides, as he read everything that came before his eyes. One poster announced a forthcoming auction conducted by Pearson and Co. "Prime Likely Negroes, both Male and Female, from Ten years of age to Twenty, imported the Last Week from Nevis, brought from Guinea. Seasoned against Smallpox. Also a House Servant, able to Read, trained to Table, raised from a Boy—" The rest was obliterated by the black word CANCELED. The holder's sudden death had thrown his estate into limbo.

Chad Pearson's jaw and fists were knotted. He looked ready to smite the wall, or Joseph. "You haven't told me yet! Who killed my brother? Who?"

Joseph shrugged his shoulders like some Quebecois. "I don't know! Too many could want him dead! The puzzle needs sorting, wheat from chaff! It's best, I don't know . . . It's best to ask, which single person would most prosper from his death?"

Pearson growled, Treat sighed, while Joseph rubbed his temple. Something nagged him, buzzed in his brain like a rattlesnake's warning. Stock-still, he waited for the idea to settle and take root.

Yet Chad Pearson, furious, grabbed Joseph's shoulder and spun him around. "I demand—"

Joseph gazed over the man's shoulder at the auction broadside. Slowly he breathed in Latin, "'I do not distinguish by the eye, but by the mind, which is the proper judge of a man.'"

"Eh?" asked the parson and merchant.

Joseph pointed at the poster, turned without a word, and ran up the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

street, careful not to spill the arsenic. "We must make the field! We must stop the burning!"

"What?" called Pearson. "Come back here!"

"What can you say?" objected Treat. "They won't like it!"

But Joseph was gone, running flat out.

All of Newport filled a pasture near where the tarred Cuffy hung in his "iron suit." Children grabbed the bottom of the cage and squealed to be swung. Adults jammed the shade along the stone walls or else sat on horse blankets under parasols. In the full glare of the sun, a stake was surrounded by pine shavings from a mill and branches culled from nearby orchards: applewood burned so hot it would melt andirons in a winter. Against the stake was propped a four-legged stool with a cracked seat. In the seat sat Hazel, feet amidst the fagots, chains on her wrists and ankles. A noose around her neck bound her to the stake, half-throttling so she sat bolt upright. At four corners of the pyre, men with batons keep gawkers at bay. The sheriff talked to a large man sweating in a purple coat, gesturing to the pyre with a birch-bark torch. Foremost on blankets, the Pearsons sipped madeira proferred by the house servant Prosper. Far back in sun stood the colony's few free Negroes, including Maroca's brood. The onlookers droned like cicadas.

The buzz deepened when Joseph hopped the stone wall, Chad Pearson and Reverend Treat trotting behind. The sheriff cursed Joseph in round tones, Reverend Treat and Chad Pearson shouted him down. Joseph held his chest, breath rattling and sobbing. He held up the tin, but the sheriff slapped it out of his hand so white powder dusted everyone. "What the hell's that?"

"Your 'snake'!" gulped the student. "Arsenic! It kills by stomach cramps, making a man swell up and suffer terrible thirst, so he drinks more and poisons himself further! But it *wasn't* stirred into the madeira, because no one else fell sick. Pearson suffered from gout. Straight madeira was too rich for his blood, so he took his wine *watered,* the only family member to do so. And who fetched him the water? It *wasn't* poor Cuffy yonder! He fell sick with stomach cramps himself, rest his soul, and a man would hardly drink wine he'd poisoned. But there was *another* in the household who might *prosper* by Pearson's death!"

Joseph's rasping was quiet, but everyone heard. "At the bottom of a broadside for a slave auction, Master Pearson advertised for sale a house servant raised from a boy, trained to table, able to read. A young servant who ran errands to the docks, where he could read an auction notice and lay hand to arsenic. Rather than be sold, this young slave poisoned his master's water. Pearson's sudden death froze his assets and stalled the slave's own sale."

The stunned crowd swiveled to stare where the Pearsons sat in the place of honor. The family members drew back, open-mouthed, until the house slave Prosper stood alone. His dark face went gray as smoke.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A muttering, then a howl rose. Men broke from the crowd, shoved the Pearsons aside, grabbed the terrified slave. At the stake, the sheriff's men loosed the rope throttling Hazel and hurled her off the stool to make room for Prosper, who shrieked and blubbered as a score of hard hands banged him in the seat. A chant rose. "Burn him! Burn him! Burn him!"

Joseph caught Hazel's chains and led her into the sturdy arms of Maroca. Hazel was more dead than alive with fright and shock, shambling like a statue of ebony wood, chains clinking. Yet she enfolded her son, kissed the head of flat black hair.

Prosper screamed, prayed, begged as he was lashed with rope, swaddled like a mummy. Men slapped his head, kicked fagots under his feet. Cries went up for a torch.

Keeping his back to the morbid scene, Joseph pushed amidst the Pearsons to fix the mistress with a deep burning stare. "Hazel has suffered much in her innocence, being damned and incarcerated and near-burned after losing her husband. She'd have precious worth in your household now. Will you give her to me? As a fee for uncovering the true murderer?"

The merchant's wife ran a rapid calculation in her head, then discarded it. "Yes, yes, you may have her. She wasn't good for much anyway. Only to my husband and brothers-in-law," she flared.

"You are all witnesses, eh?" Excited, Joseph's French mannerisms surfaced. "She belongs to me. Then witness, too, I set her free and charge her to the care of Maroca, a freewoman."

He turned to go, but Chad Pearson caught his sleeve. "Wait. Prosper poisoned Francis to stay in our household? That makes no sense! What difference the master?"

The student shrugged. "What does a slave own? Nothing, not even himself. Only his station, the only life he knew. Think on Cuffy, who despite seeing his wife abused, fought to save his beloved master with a snake panacea. 'The slave loves the whip.' And remember this: 'Master, be good to your slaves, for know that you have a master in Heaven.'"

A sheriff's man had unlocked Hazel's manacles. Sweeping his arms wide, Joseph gathered in Maroca and her children and Hazel and her baby, urged them, pushed them, hurried them down the dusty road towards Newport and home. He had to drag Quamino, who stood stricken. Tears spilled down her cheeks, the first tears he'd seen on any black. "Quickly, apace!"

They weren't fast enough. Prosper screamed as flames licked his legs. To cover the noise, Joseph thought to recite. But all he could quote was: "'If poisonous minerals, and if that tree, whose fruit threw death on else-immortal us, if lecherous goats, if serpents envious cannot be damn'd; why should I be?'" ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE WHOLE STORY

by Stephanie Kay Bendel

"Violets are blue,
Roses are red.
This time on Monday
You're gonna be dead."

Donovan looked up from the cut-and-pasted words of the letter, ran his fingers through his thinning gray hair, and grinned at me. "Catchy, isn't it, Morgan?" He leaned back in his chair and put his feet up on his desk.

"Inspector Donovan!" Alycia Winnegar's voice cracked with anger. "How dare you joke? My life is in danger!" She was in her late forties and, judging from her wide brown eyes and high cheekbones, had once been more than pretty. Now she appeared worn and tired.

The number of submissions *EQMM* receives that can truly be called "whodunits" is small compared to the suspense, crime, and adventure stories that come across our desks. Perhaps that is why we found this new tale by Colorado writer Stephanie Kay Bendel so refreshing; Ms. Bendel has managed to meld the police procedural and the classical fair-play mystery. She is a veteran of mystery writing with more than a dozen works to her credit. ✝

Donovan sobered. "Sorry, Mrs. Winnegar. Didn't mean any harm. It's just that—well, this isn't your run-of-the mill death threat. Are you sure someone isn't playing a joke on you?"

"There's nothing funny about it," the woman said evenly. "Are you going to take it seriously or not?"

"I'm perfectly willing to take it seriously, Mrs. Winnegar," Donovan said lightly, "if you'll just tell me who wants to kill you."

Alycia paled. "How should I know? I haven't done anything to anyone!"

Donovan smiled ever so slightly. Something was going on that I didn't understand.

I'd only come to the Porterfield Police Department two years earlier when my father-in-law suffered a stroke and Myrna told me she wanted to move upstate so she could be near him. I'd been disappointed about leaving New York, but the prospect of working with the legendary Charlie Donovan made up for it.

Donovan had made a name for himself in New York before my time.

©1998 by Stephanie Kay Bendel

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Long before I came to Porterfield I had heard all about him; how he'd brought down a couple of councilmen; how he couldn't be bribed by underworld figures; how he had no tolerance for cops who didn't go by the book. There were different stories about why Donovan had left New York for the comparative quiet of Porterfield. One was a failed attempt on his life that had left him with a permanent limp. Another story I'd heard was that Donovan had locked horns with some powerful politicians who made it impossible for him to do his job the way he felt he had to. Whatever the real story, I'd never heard anyone—cop, judge, or defense lawyer—criticize Donovan or his work. He was known for being thorough and fair.

"Are you going to do anything about this threat?" Mrs. Winnegar's voice was shrill. One henna-dyed curl bounced on her powdered cheek.

Donovan cleared his throat. "I'll have the letter checked for prints and see if we can identify the publications these words were clipped from. Did it come in an envelope, by the way?"

She rummaged in her tan calfskin purse and pulled out a folded business-size envelope. "Yes, but it wasn't sent through the mail. It was dropped through the letter slot on the front door."

The envelope was blank. Donovan grabbed it by one corner. "I suppose your prints are all over it?"

She flushed. "I didn't know what was inside until I'd opened it. There was no reason for me not to handle it."

"We'll need your fingerprints then, in order to eliminate them." He paused in what seemed a very deliberate way, and smiled. "Oh, I forgot! We already have your prints on file, don't we?"

Alycia Winnegar sucked in her breath. "May I speak to someone else in this department, please?" I glanced at Donovan. He nodded and I stepped forward. "Detective Eugene Morgan," I said. "Why don't you come with me?" I led her to my office down the hall. It was smaller than Donovan's, but it seemed roomier because it wasn't crammed with files and boxes. Whereas his walls were lined with newspaper clippings and photographs, mine were bare except for a couple of certificates and diplomas and a picture of my little son and his dog.

"Sit down." I indicated a wooden chair in front of my government-issue gray metal desk.

"He won't take this seriously," Alycia Winnegar complained. "Someone's got to protect me!"

I sighed. "Ma'am, Charlie Donovan is the best. He's a policeman's policeman. If he says he'll check it out, he'll do everything that can be done."

She sniffed and squared her slim shoulders. "Why don't I believe you?"

"Look," I said softly, "Charlie just got out of the hospital last week. Ulcers. He's cranky. That doesn't mean he won't do a thorough job. I give you my word—everything that can be done will be."

Alycia stared at me suspiciously. "You don't know the whole story, do you?"

It was my turn to stare. "There's more?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She stood up to leave. "Never mind. I see I'll have to take care of myself."

Later I talked to Donovan. "What did she mean when she said I didn't know the whole story?"

He walked over to the water cooler, pulled a medicine vial out of his pocket, and took two tablets, washing them down with water from a paper cup. "Alycia Winnegar poisoned her husband six years ago," he said matter-of-factly. "We had her. Open-and-shut case. We found the cyanide in the back of her linen closet in an aspirin bottle. Her fingerprints were all over it. We had witnesses who testified to a violent argument between Alycia and her husband just the day before. Pete had found himself a younger gal and Alycia caught them in bed."

I shrugged. "Happens all the time. Doesn't mean she killed him. She could have divorced him and taken him to the cleaners."

Donovan closed his eyes for a moment and shifted his weight in his chair as if he were in pain. Then he looked up at me and smiled thinly. "Not quite. There was a prenuptial agreement. If Alycia sued for divorce, she got very little. When he dropped dead, however, she walked away with two thirds of his estate—close to five million."

"What happened to the other third?"

"Her stepson—by Winnegar's first marriage—got that."

"If you had her dead to rights," I said slowly, "what happened?"

Donovan spat into the wastebasket. "The American justice system, that's what! She hired a high-priced lawyer and he found out that we'd mistakenly filled out the wrong form when we applied for the search warrant. Convinced the judge the warrant was illegal and we couldn't use the poison or the fingerprints as evidence. The D.A. figured we didn't have enough to convict without them, so she walked."

He belched softly and winced, now in obvious pain. Ulcers are an occupational hazard in police work; no doubt just relating the frustrating case of Mrs. Winnegar had stirred up Donovan's gastric juices and they were burning his insides. I felt guilty for bringing the subject up.

"Look," I said. "Let me handle this letter business. I can see the woman has got you upset."

"Upset?" Donovan chuckled. "I haven't enjoyed anything so much in a long time! But you can do the legwork." He rubbed his stomach thoughtfully. "I'm going to have to take it easy."

Sergeant Holden from the lab told me that the only prints he'd been able to lift from the letter were Alycia Winnegar's. "There's a partial thumbprint up here in the corner—not enough for a positive ID—but it's probably Donovan's. Otherwise nothing. The paper's ordinary low-grade typing paper, found in every supermarket and drugstore in town."

I looked at the careless array of scissored letters arranged on the white sheet. Some of the words were on newsprint, others were colored and on glossy paper—obviously from magazines. "Any lead on the lettering?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Holden shook his head. "These two words probably came from the local paper," he said, pointing to "Monday" and "dead." "The words 'time' and 'red' probably came from a magazine cover, but I haven't figured out which one. The rest look like inner pages of magazines, except for 'violets.' I'm pretty sure that came from a greeting card."

He turned to me. "How's the old man doing?" For a moment I thought he was talking about my father-in-law, and I wondered how the two men even knew each other. Then I realized he meant Donovan.

"His insides are bothering him. I don't understand why he doesn't take some time off. Working is just aggravating those ulcers."

"I see you haven't heard the whole story," Holden said softly.

"You mean about Alycia Winnegar feeding cyanide to her husband?" I asked.

He shook his head. "I mean about Donovan. He's got more than ulcers. The word is the doctors found the big C all over the place. They just sewed him up and released him. I heard he hasn't got long."

I felt sick to my stomach. "Why is he here? He should be home with his family!"

Holden smiled grimly. "Home? Have you ever seen the two rooms he lives in? Family? His wife left him two years ago. His kids haven't spoken to him since. *This* is his home. *We're* his family."

I shook my head. "I'm going to talk to him."

"No!" Holden grabbed my arm. "We're not supposed to know. Donovan wants to go on as if everything's normal. He won't talk about it."

I headed back to my office, but I couldn't stop thinking about Donovan. A cop's life isn't an easy one. Long and often irregular hours, the constant threat of violence, the depression that comes of seeing the underbelly of society on a daily basis—these things tend to tear up relationships. It's no surprise when a cop's wife—or husband—decides it's too much to take. Still, I couldn't imagine what it was like for Donovan to know he didn't have much time left and he didn't have anyone to turn to.

My mind was still churning when I got back to my desk and found a message from Alycia Winnegar. I called her.

"I got another one, Detective Morgan."

"Another letter?"

"Yes. At least something in another blank envelope. Someone slipped it through the letter slot while I was out this afternoon. I haven't opened it. I thought I shouldn't, in case of fingerprints."

"Good thinking. I'll be right over."

The Winnegar estate was on the edge of town, a big three-story brick mansion on five acres of greenery. The front door was opened by an elderly woman. Behind her stood a bald gorilla with a handlebar moustache who eyed me suspiciously until Alycia nodded.

"My bodyguard," she said to me. "I hired him this afternoon. I thought it best to take precautions. He's a former wrestler. His name is Marco."

She'd changed into a pair of white slacks and a pink summer-weight sweater, and she seemed less jaded and more vulnerable than she had

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

down at the station. She wore less makeup, too, for I noticed dark circles under her eyes.

She dismissed the gorilla and the maid, then took the letter from a desk drawer in the library and handed it to me. I slipped on a pair of surgical gloves I'd brought along, slit the envelope with my penknife, and read the message of pasted words.

"Roses are red,
Violets are blue.
Don't look now,
I'm watching you."

Alycia, sitting in a brocaded wing chair, paled as I read the message aloud. "Who would do this? Why are they doing it to me?"

I stared at her. "You really have no idea?"

She grew even more ashen. "You think this has something to do with Pete's death, don't you?"

I said indifferently, "I don't know, ma'am. Do you think it does?"

She shivered and took a moment to regain her composure. "Look, Detective Morgan, I know there are plenty of people in the police department who think I killed Pete, and they're not going to go out of their way to protect me. But you've got to believe me! I didn't kill him, I don't know who's sending these letters, and I'm scared!" Her eyes were a golden honey color, and as they widened with fear, I saw how she must have looked twenty years earlier. Alycia had been a real beauty.

"Your husband's death was before my time, ma'am, but I understand he was poisoned."

"That's what the police said," she replied evenly.

"I heard they found cyanide in your linen closet and your prints on the bottle."

"It was an aspirin bottle! It had been taken from my medicine cabinet! Of course my prints were on it!"

"And who put the cyanide in the bottle?"

"I don't know!" She stood up and her voice rose. "I was framed! It was only by the grace of God that I'm not spending the rest of my life in prison for a crime I didn't commit!"

"The grace of God or a hotshot attorney?" I asked.

"That too!" She spat the words at me. "Look, if you're not going to help me, get out of here!"

I put my hand on her arm and she jerked away. "I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to upset you, and I *am* going to help you."

She seemed to calm down. "You mean it?"

I nodded. "Whoever is sending these letters is breaking the law that I've sworn to uphold. May I take this letter with me?"

When I got back to the office, Donovan had left for the day, so I had a cup of bad coffee and talked with Manny Bernard. Manny was a pale scarecrow of a man who had to duck when he went through doorways.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He was second in command under Donovan, and everybody assumed he would take over when the old man retired. Now I found myself wondering if Manny had any idea how soon that was going to be.

"Oh, that case!" Manny grumbled sourly as he peered over my shoulder and read the letter. "So the broad claims she was framed, eh? In a pig's eye! She was guilty. We had her nailed."

"I imagine Donovan took it pretty hard when the case fell through."

"Yeah, we all did. Of course, I felt worst of all."

"Why was that?"

"I see you haven't heard the whole story. I was the one who grabbed the wrong forms. I was working the night shift and Donovan was home in bed when the M.E. called him and told him the tox screen had turned up cyanide in the body. Donovan called me and told me to grab a couple of forms 3487, wake up Judge Powell, and get a search warrant for the Winnegar mansion. Only I goofed and grabbed a couple of 3478's and the search was ruled illegal at the preliminary hearing. The dame walked, and it was all my fault."

I felt sorry for Manny. Policemen have a lot of nightmares, and one of them is blowing a case by making a stupid mistake.

Manny shook his head. "I should have checked. That case is the only real black mark on Donovan's record, and it was my fault. I still feel awful about that. I've worked under Donovan for fifteen years, and I've watched him put cases together so tight that an atom bomb couldn't blow them apart. He's given me breaks and promotions—I owe him, and I let him down."

"We all make mistakes," I said, trying to console him.

"Donovan doesn't," Manny pointed out.

I almost said, "Maybe he does and you just don't know it," but I figured that wouldn't appease Manny—might even rile him—so I bit the words back.

I noticed that he, too, had black circles under his eyes and I commented on them.

"Yeah," he said. "Comes of working two jobs."

"Are you moonlighting?" I was surprised. Young officers often moonlight as a matter of course—what with kids and mortgages, they have to—but few of them continue to do two jobs when they reach Manny's rank and age.

He sighed. "My youngest boy starts college this fall, and the second daughter's getting married before Christmas. Evy's taking all the overtime she can get at the hospital, but there's never enough."

I made sympathetic noises and nodded. "What kind of work are you doing?"

"Right now, I'm tending bar at Gallagher's. Every now and then, I get some security work." He laughed sardonically. "You'd be surprised at the talents I've acquired in my part-time jobs. Would you believe I've been a short-order cook, a milkman, a tree surgeon, and a piano tuner?"

I laughed, but Manny didn't.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

❖ ❖ ❖

The next morning when I arrived at the office, Alycia Winnegar was waiting for me with another letter. The gorilla stood behind her, arms folded, a defiant expression on his face.

"It was on the floor in the hall when I got up this morning," she said. "I didn't open it and I put on gloves before I touched it."

I nodded in approval. "Not that I think it'll make any difference. The lab says there were no prints on the second letter. I don't expect any on this one, either." Nonetheless, I pulled a pair of surgical gloves from my desk drawer, opened the envelope, and read the message:

"Roses are red,
Violets are blue.
You killed me,
I'm gonna kill you."

Alycia Winnegar's eyes widened and she keeled over in a dead faint. Neither Marco nor I was quick enough to catch her before her head struck the corner of my filing cabinet. Blood spurted from the gash on her scalp. I knew the injury was probably superficial—even small scalp wounds tend to bleed a lot—but under the circumstances I thought it best to have her examined by a doctor. I called a patrolman to escort her and Marco to the emergency room.

When Donovan heard what had happened, he chuckled. When he read the contents of the latest letter, he roared. "Beautiful! She was really scared, huh? Maybe there is some justice, after all."

Policemen tend to have a black sense of humor—it's the only way to cope with some of the stuff we run into on the job. But—along with most officers—I do believe there are some lines that should not be crossed. In the instant before she collapsed, I'd caught sight of the look in Alycia Winnegar's eyes. She'd been as terrified as a small animal in the clutches of a predator. And now I was seeing glee in Donovan's eyes. At another time, his attitude would have bothered me, but knowing he was dying, I couldn't blame him for enjoying the moment.

"Tell me about the Winnegar case," I said.

He settled into his chair and rubbed his cheek thoughtfully. "Not much to tell. It was six years ago. Pete Winnegar was having a cup of coffee at home one Thursday morning before leaving for his office. Suddenly he fell off his chair. One of the maids found him and called the family doctor, but Pete was already dead. He was overweight and out of shape and had had a couple of angina attacks earlier, so the doctor wasn't entirely surprised, but he wouldn't commit to the cause of death without an autopsy. There was no rush on it, however, so the M.E. didn't see the results of the tox screen until late that night. When he realized Pete had been poisoned, he called me."

"And you sent people out to search the house," I put in.

He nodded and made a face. "With an illegal warrant, as it turned

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

out. They found the bottle with cyanide powder in the linen closet. They also found cyanide in the sugar bowl on the breakfast table."

"So anyone might have been poisoned. You can't be sure Pete was the intended victim."

"Yes, we can. Only Pete and Alycia ever had coffee at the breakfast table, and Alycia never used sugar, just that artificial stuff."

I shook my head. "But I don't see how that proves she put the stuff into the sugar bowl. Anyone might have."

Donovan grinned. "What's going on? You taking a shine to her or something? The case was a little better than that! The maid testified she filled the sugar bowl the previous day, Wednesday, after breakfast, so the poison had to be put in sometime between late Wednesday morning and early Thursday morning. No one else was in the house but Pete, Alycia, and the servants, and the servants had no reason to kill him. We checked them out thoroughly."

"What about Winnegar's son?"

"He lives in Detroit. Hadn't been to the estate for a couple of weeks before his father's death."

"That doesn't mean he couldn't have dropped in without anyone knowing and doctored the sugar bowl," I muttered. "What with airline connections, he could fly in from Detroit and be back home in a few hours. Of course," I added, "he'd be taking a chance of being spotted by one of the servants."

"Actually not. The servants all have Wednesday afternoons off. Mrs. Winnegar usually met a lady friend for lunch and then they'd go shopping or whatever it is rich ladies do on Wednesday afternoons. The schedule was a big element in the case."

"How so?"

"Well, that particular Wednesday afternoon, Alycia got a severe headache and her friend brought her home to lie down. When the two women got to the master bedroom, however, they found the master—and a lady friend. An airline stewardess, I believe."

"Airline attendant," I corrected him. Myrna's always on me to be more sensitive to women's issues, but Donovan just shrugged.

"Whatever. Her name was Brandy, or Bambi, or Bunny—something like that. They'd met on one of Pete's frequent business trips. Anyhow, that's when everything hit the fan. Alycia gave the stewardess a black eye and broke a vase over Pete's head." He paused. "And the very next morning, Pete dropped dead at the breakfast table, leaving Alycia a very wealthy woman."

I doodled on the pad in front of me. I drew a dagger and some dollar signs and a poor representation of a curvaceous female. "You still haven't eliminated the son. He'd have known the servants were off on Wednesdays. He could have slipped both the poison into the sugar bowl and the aspirin bottle into the linen closet."

Donovan grinned. "You know, Morgan, you're really stubborn! Don't you think I would have checked that out? Young Winnegar—his first

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

name is Neil—was on a cruise off the Florida coast with a yacht full of friends. They'd been aboard for three days and that's where he was when they notified him of his father's death. No way could he have planted the cyanide in the sugar bowl!"

I said, "Earlier you said no one was in the house during the critical period except the Winnegars and the servants; but you were wrong."

"What do you mean?"

"Two other people were there Wednesday afternoon—Pete's mistress and Mrs. Winnegar's friend."

Donovan harumphed. "But neither of them had a motive. In fact, from what we discovered later, it seemed Brandy or Bambi had every reason to want Pete to stay alive."

"How so?"

"She lived too well for an airline stewardess. And every month she deposited five thousand in cash to her bank account."

I whistled. "Winnegar?"

"We weren't able to prove it, but it's a good bet. That would have been pocket change for him, and he'd be likely to give her cash, so there'd be no records."

"And how did she explain the income?"

"She didn't. We weren't charging her with a crime, so we couldn't really force the issue, but it was pretty clear."

"And you checked out Mrs. Winnegar's friend?"

"Absolutely. Nothing there. She was more of an acquaintance, actually. Both were members of the same health spa, and she volunteered to take Alycia home when her headache got bad. Was terribly embarrassed by the scene she'd walked in on and left the estate almost immediately." Donovan cleared his throat. "Believe me, Morgan, Alycia did it. There are no other possibilities."

"Then who do you think is sending her these letters?"

For a moment Donovan was the picture of health. There was color in his cheeks and a twinkle in his eye. "From the sound of the last one, it looks like old Pete's sending her messages from the grave."

"Come on! You can't really believe that!"

"And you don't really believe she was framed, do you?"

I went down to Records and pulled the file on the Winnegar case. Donovan's memory had been uncannily accurate as to details and I found little new information. The flight attendant's name was Brandy Reynolds, age twenty-six, address listed as the Carlyle Apartments. I called the manager there. After he checked the records, he told me that a Miss Reynolds had moved away six years ago, leaving no forwarding address.

The woman who had brought Alycia home from the health spa the day before the murder was listed as Connie Templeton. Respected wife of respected banker. A conservative couple known for their support of various charities. Not a bad word to be said for either of them.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

That left Neil Winnegar.

Donovan was at his desk, washing down more pills with a glass of water when I walked into his office. He looked drawn and suddenly smaller than usual. I found myself wondering how much pain he was in.

"Is there enough money in the budget for me to take a quick trip to Detroit?" I asked.

He gave me the tolerant look of a weary parent. "Is this really necessary?"

I'd anticipated his reaction and had prepared a comeback. "We have to consider the whole picture. Somebody is threatening Mrs. Winnegar. If anything happens to her and it turns out we didn't take the situation seriously, we're gonna have egg on our face."

He sighed. "Okay, go."

The next morning I stood in the entrance of a lush penthouse condo overlooking Lake St. Clair. Neil Winnegar extended a cool hand to me. I judged him to be about thirty-five and I didn't like anything about him: his too-slick hair, his perfectly manicured nails, the designer sweatsuit that probably had never encountered sweat. His voice was syrupy and his hooded eyes cold. He reminded me of a snake.

"So, someone is threatening my dear stepmother," he said as he indicated a chair in the luxurious living room. "How unfortunate!" He didn't even try to hide his glee.

"You don't seem too upset about it," I remarked.

"Upset?" He laughed harshly as he sat in a green leather chair opposite me. "Frankly, I'm delighted. That conniving bitch deserves a good terrorizing."

"I take it you two didn't get along."

"And I take it you don't know the whole story. She was a two-bit actress when she met my old man. Pretended she adored him, fawned all over him until he married her. Then everything changed. She redecorated the whole house—her taste, of course. Spent his money like there was no tomorrow—clothes, jewelry, trips, cars. . . ."

"Did your father object?"

"Not at first."

"But you did."

Neil Winnegar hesitated, so I helped him out. "I mean, it was your inheritance she was squandering, wasn't it?"

His face grew dark. "Damn right! And it's the better part of my inheritance she's living on right now, and in my home!"

"So you'd have every reason to want to frighten her," I said softly.

His head jerked up at my words. "Are you trying to pin these threats on me? Well, you're sniffing down the wrong trail, Lieutenant. I don't like the woman—hell, I hate her! How am I supposed to feel? She killed my father! But I didn't send her any letters, threatening or otherwise."

"You sure about that?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He snorted. "You cops! Can't do anything right. First you let her get away with murder, and now you're trying to set me up with these letters." He stood up and unceremoniously showed me the door.

As I walked past him, I paused. "How did you and your father get along?"

His face darkened and he hesitated for just a moment. "We got along fine," he said evenly, "until *she* came."

When I got back to Porterfield, I learned that Alycia had received yet another note. Marco had brought it down to the station and given it to Donovan, who showed it to me. It was in the same kind of ordinary-looking, unmarked white envelope as the earlier letters. This one said:

"Roses will die,
Violets will wilt.
A murderous woman
Soon will be kilt."

I frowned. "Kilt?"

Donovan smiled widely. "Poetic license, I guess." He took the letter back. "What did you find out in Detroit?"

"My impression is that Neil and Pete didn't get along, despite what Neil says. What with the money situation, he had motive to kill the old man, but no opportunity—as far as we can see. And he certainly dislikes his stepmother enough to terrorize her, but I can't figure out how he could be sending the letters. They're being delivered in person, and he certainly isn't doing it. I checked with the phone company and he hasn't placed any long distance calls to this area in months—at least not from his home phones."

Donovan chuckled. He seemed to be enjoying my bewilderment. Then he groaned and pulled out his pill bottle again.

I was having a cup of coffee and a Danish at the diner down the street from the station late Saturday morning when Manny walked in and took the stool next to me at the counter.

"How's it going?" he asked as he studied the menu.

"I'm worried about Donovan," I said. "Have you noticed anything odd about his behavior lately?"

Manny snorted. "The man's dying, he won't talk about it, he's living on pain killers. Other than that, he seems fine to me."

"So you know, too."

"The word gets around. Everybody feels awful. We all wish we could talk to him."

I nodded. "He's in a weird frame of mind. Do you think he's going off the deep end?"

"You mean is he going to eat his revolver? No, I don't see him doing that." Manny ordered a cup of coffee and an English muffin before turning back to me. "Why do you ask?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I wasn't thinking about suicide," I said. "I had in mind other—well, desperate measures."

Manny glanced at me suspiciously. "Like what?"

I shook my head. "Never mind. It was probably a dumb idea. I gotta get back to work."

"Anything new on the Winnegar case?"

"Not so far. We're double-checking the servants, but we haven't found anything that suggests one of them might have poisoned Pete or sent Alycia those letters."

He sighed. "*She* poisoned him. And who cares who's sending her the letters? Whoever it is is doing us a favor. Maybe she'll break down and confess."

I dismounted my stool and confronted him. "Sending those letters is against the law." I kept my voice low and even. "It's our job to find out who's doing it. And Alycia's innocent until proven guilty—you know that!"

Manny darkened. He didn't like being corrected by a lieutenant, but he had the good grace not to point that out. "Well, for an innocent person, she's pretty scared," he said. "You know that mountain with a moustache she hired as a bodyguard?"

"What about him?"

"Yesterday, when he was down at the station with the latest letter, he asked me where to buy trained guard dogs. She wants a couple of Doberman pinschers to patrol her yard."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. I sent him down to Corcoran's—the kennel that trains the K-9's. I don't mind telling you I didn't like the idea of helping a cold-blooded murderess, but I did it because I *do* know the law, Lieutenant."

I felt my face grow hot. "Sorry about that, sir. I didn't mean to offend. It's just—this case is making me crazy."

He nodded. "What's the next step?"

I headed for the door. "Finding Brandy Reynolds," I said over my shoulder. "She seems to have disappeared."

The Carlyle Apartments were located in one of the better sections of town. After ringing a lot of doorbells to see whether anyone still remembered Brandy Reynolds, I found myself looking into a large blue eye, surrounded by apparently false lashes, peering at me through the crack of a chained door. I flashed my badge and explained why I was there.

The woman, in her early forties, unchained the door and let me in, all the while eyeing me suspiciously. She told me her name was Mae. She wore a paint-stained sweatshirt and blue jeans. Her figure wasn't bad. "Yeah, I knew Brandy. Not well, but she lived just down the hall and we had coffee sometimes."

She shooed a white cat off a blue velvet chair and gestured for me to sit down. I did so reluctantly, not wanting to offend her but knowing my pants were going to be coated with cat hair when I left.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You know anything about her boyfriend?" I asked.

"Just that she called him Winnie, and he was rich. I figured he was married, too, because he never came here—she always met him somewhere else."

"Do you remember the summer he was killed? It was about six years ago."

"He was killed? I didn't know. I was out of the country most of that summer, and when I came back, Brandy had moved away. I figured she either went off with him or they broke up."

"What kind of person would you say she was?"

Mae shook her head. "Young, ambitious—greedy, actually. She was always telling me that she planned to move to a big city, so she could work the major airline routes, particularly the international ones. She wanted to be around wealthy people who traveled first class. Wasn't interested in helping students and young mothers with crying kids."

I stopped by the Winnegar estate before heading back to the office. As I drove up, I was greeted by a pair of barking Dobermans who leaped at my car door and bared their teeth. I tooted the horn. Marco came out, grunted some unintelligible command, and the dogs calmed immediately.

"Sorry, Lieutenant," Marco said as he opened the car door for me. "It's their first day, and they're a little hyper. You want to see Mrs. Winnegar?"

The dogs watched me as I walked in the front door, but they didn't move a muscle. Whatever the magic word was that Marco had used, they respected it.

Alycia Winnegar must have had her hair done that morning. The henna was too even. She needed a few gray hairs to make her look more real, I reflected.

"Well," she asked as she led me into the library, "have you found anything?"

I shook my head as I sat in one of the leather wing chairs by the fireplace. "No prints on the latest letter, either. Whoever's doing this is being very careful."

She leaned against the massive desk and toyed with the rings on her fingers, turning them one way, then the other. Her hands shook slightly.

"How did Mr. Winnegar and his son get along?" I asked.

She seemed surprised by the question. "Okay, I guess. Pete *was* concerned about the way Neil spent money. He had a sizable income from a family trust, but often asked for more."

"Did they quarrel about it?"

"From time to time. Then Pete decided he wasn't giving the boy another cent. Told him if he couldn't live off the income from his trust, he'd have to get a job."

"And how did Neil react?"

She considered. "Pretty well, I thought. He just said, 'All right, Dad. If that's the way you want it.' He still called regularly and came to visit

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

once or twice after that. Not a word was said about money. Pete felt good. He figured he'd done the right thing—forced the boy to grow up."

But the man I'd seen in Detroit hadn't had to grow up after all. His father's death must have brought him a couple of million, and from what I'd seen, Neil was still living the life of a playboy. It seemed Pete Winnegar had a wife, a son, and a mistress, all of whom liked to spend his money.

I cleared my throat. "I realize this is awkward, Mrs. Winnegar, but what do you know about your late husband's mistress?"

She seemed amused. "Which one?"

I was taken aback. "Ah—Miss Reynolds. Do you know how long he'd been seeing her?"

"A couple of months, as far as I know. Before that, it was a cocktail waitress, and before her a medical technician. They were all under thirty."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I knew what he was like. I just never expected him to bring one of his little tramps into my bed."

"If this had been going on for a long time, why didn't you just leave him?"

Alycia Winnegar pulled a pack of cigarettes from the pocket of her skirt and lit one, taking a long drag on it. "You know something, Lieutenant Morgan? Men are louses! I grew up dirt poor and if I'd left Pete, I'd have been poor again, and I'd probably end up with some poor louse. At least when you're with a rich louse—" She glanced around the room at her expensive furniture and original artwork and sighed— "there are some consolations."

I didn't say anything. She studied her manicured nails and exhaled a long puff of smoke. "I know what you're thinking. You figure now I've got it all. You still believe I killed him, don't you?"

"I didn't say that."

"You don't have to. You cops are all alike. You don't care who's sending these letters. You're just using them to see if you can't still pin Pete's murder on me. Well, I don't need you now. No one's going to slip any more letters through that door slot. Even the mailman won't come to the house with the dogs out there, so I'm getting a post-office box and if our friend sends me letters there, he's committing a federal crime. Then I'll have more on my side than just the local police."

I was surprised to see tears in her eyes. "For what it's worth, Mrs. Winnegar, I don't think you killed Pete."

She looked at me warily. "You mean that?"

I nodded. "Call it a gut feeling."

The tears started flowing then. "You don't know what it's like. I was never tried, never convicted, but I'm in prison, all the same. I have no friends. The people we used to socialize with avoid me. I know what they say behind my back, and I can't defend myself." She rummaged in a desk drawer for some tissues and wiped her eyes, smearing her mascara.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Believe me, Lieutenant," she said softly, "if you found out who poisoned Pete, I'd be the happiest woman in the world."

"We checked out all the servants again," I told Donovan. "There's nothing to make us think any of them had a hand in killing Pete Winnegar."

"I told you so," he replied. "We checked them out thoroughly six years ago. How many times do I have to tell you, the only person who had motive, means, and opportunity was Alycia Winnegar."

"I still don't think she did it."

"Why not?"

I leaned across his desk and said, "Answer this: Was the killing of Peter Winnegar a crime of passion or a cold-blooded premeditated murder?"

"A crime of passion. She was furious about his playing around and humiliated because she found him in bed with another woman—by the way, the post office says the forwarding address the mistress left them was General Delivery—Detroit."

I refused to be distracted. "A crime of passion," I said slowly. "So where did the cyanide come from? According to your reports, you never did find the source of the poison. You checked all the pharmacies, drug companies, chemical supply houses. The stuff was relatively pure—where else could she have gotten it?"

Donovan coughed and spat into the wastebasket. "What difference does it make? Her fingerprints were all over the bottle. And anybody with as much money as the Winnegars had can get hold of anything, no questions asked."

"But they'd still have to contact the right people."

"Of course."

"And that takes time."

"So?"

"So when did she get the cyanide? She found Pete and Brandy together late Wednesday afternoon. By Thursday morning Pete was dead. How did she get hold of the cyanide so fast?"

Donovan shrugged. "Who's to say she didn't have it already? Maybe she'd been planning to bump him off for some time."

"Then it was premeditated?"

"Maybe it was."

"You're saying she went through all the trouble of acquiring the cyanide in order to poison Pete in hopes that it would look like a heart attack?"

"Why not? It's been done before. Look at the Wilson case! And the M.E. told me afterward that he almost missed the cyanide in Winnegar's body. It was just luck that he caught a whiff of bitter almonds when he was examining the guy's throat. Otherwise he probably wouldn't have done a tox screen."

"Just the same, if she was cold-bloodedly planning to off the guy, I don't see her doing it the morning after they had a big fight in front of witnesses. It doesn't make sense."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"If everyone in this world made sense, you and I wouldn't have very much work to do," Donovan growled.

"I still don't think we're seeing the whole picture."

I was lazing in my hammock Sunday afternoon when Myrna called me to the phone. It was Donovan. "Thought you'd like to know we tracked down the Reynolds gal in Michigan."

I reached for a pencil. "Give me her address and phone number."

"No need. She's a resident of the Shady Lawn Cemetery outside of Flint."

"She's dead?"

"Uh-huh. Died of a mixture of sleeping pills and alcohol five and a half years ago."

"Was there an autopsy?"

"Of course. They ruled it an accident. According to the neighbors, she wasn't depressed, no money problems, no health problems. It happens. People forget how dangerous it is to mix alcohol and sedatives."

I got a funny feeling, a tingling on the back of my neck that comes when I know I'm close to the truth in a particularly frustrating case. "Donovan, do me a favor. Call the police in Detroit and ask them to fax us a copy of her financial statements."

"Why?"

"I think they're a big part of the whole story."

Before he hung up, I heard him coughing on the other end of the line. I felt guilty going back to my hammock with a can of beer.

I felt even worse when I came in to work early Monday morning and learned that the old man had been taken to the hospital not two hours after I'd last spoken to him. Sergeant Holden broke the news to me. "It doesn't look good," he said, shaking his head. "He collapsed at his desk. The paramedics said he barely had a pulse when they took him. Manny's over at the hospital now. He's pretty broken up." He cleared his throat and muttered, "And, oh, by the way, she got another one."

"She? You mean Alycia Winnegar? Another letter?"

"Uh-huh. I have the original down in the lab. I was just bringing a copy up to your office." He handed me a sheet of paper with the now-familiar assorted sizes of letters.

"Roses are red,
Lilies are white.
Time's up, Alycia.
Tonight's the night!"

"She's in your office," Holden said. "Along with her bodyguard. Says she's not leaving until we give her protection."

Mrs. Winnegar appeared haggard and ashen, and she spoke in a low, cracking voice. "He slipped the letter through the door slot sometime during the night. The dogs were patrolling the yard. I don't know how

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

he got past them! The man at the kennel said no one could get past them, except—" she almost choked— "except a ghost!"

"A ghost didn't write these letters," I said sternly.

I glanced over at Marco. "Where were you when this one arrived?"

The massive man glared at me. "I was sleeping on a couch in the library. Ten feet from the front door. I sleep lightly. If there was any noise at all, I would have heard it."

"How did he do it?" Alycia was almost in tears. "He's going to kill me! We can't stop him. You've got to help me!"

"No one's going to kill you," I said. "I'm assigning a police officer to be with you at all times. Between him and Marco, you'll be safe."

She didn't look very confident. "Inspector Bernard said I'd be safe with those dogs he recommended. He said I couldn't have police protection."

Manny would say that, I reflected. I was going to have some explaining to do. "I'm taking responsibility for appointing an officer to you. Now go home and try not to worry."

I arranged for a patrolman to accompany her, then I called Corcoran's kennel.

"I don't understand it," he said. "Those dogs were well-trained. I can't believe they'd let a stranger on the grounds without raising holy hell."

Remembering the reception I'd received from the Dobermans, I was inclined to agree.

"Anyhow, I took the dogs back and gave her a couple of German shepherds."

"Did you examine the Dobermans?"

"Sure. They looked fine."

"Any chance they could have been drugged?"

"I thought of that. I took blood samples to see if any residue showed up. My veterinarian says no. That doesn't mean that they weren't drugged with a quickly metabolizing agent, of course, but it's unlikely. All my dogs are trained not to accept food from strangers."

"Could you send me a list of your employees, say for the past six or seven years?"

I could practically hear Corcoran bristle. "Hey, my people are good, responsible citizens! I don't like the idea of you suggesting that one of them might be mixed up in this."

"I'm not suggesting anything. Just send me the list, please, as soon as possible."

At the hospital I found Donovan conscious but very weak. The nurse in charge said, "Keep it short and don't upset him."

Donovan's first words to me were, "You were right. There's a lot more to this case than we were seeing."

"What do you mean?"

"Didn't you see the fax? No, of course you didn't. It's probably still on my desk." He paused to draw a painful breath. "It had just come when

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I—" He didn't want to say the word collapsed, and I nodded to show I understood.

"Anyhow," he went on, "Brandy Reynolds had no financial problems. She was still getting five thousand a month deposited in cash to her account—six months after Pete Winnegar bought the farm."

I thought about the implications of that. "Do you suppose he had set up some kind of trust that paid her automatically, and it kept on after his death?"

Donovan shook his head. "From what I know of Winnegar, he'd be the last man to continue to pay for services after he was no longer receiving them."

"Then what? You think she found another boyfriend that fast?"

He smiled weakly. "I think she had another one all along."

"Her neighbor lady only mentioned a guy named Winnie."

Donovan grinned at me before he started coughing.

I followed his train of thought and waited until he caught his breath. "Of course. She was Neil Winnegar's girlfriend. We already know he was not too happy about the way his new stepmother was spending what he considered to be his inheritance. So what do you think? He put her up to playing footsie with the old man. They establish a routine of using the family mansion as a trysting place on Wednesday afternoons while the servants are off and Alycia is out. Then, one day when Neil is going to have an iron-clad alibi a thousand miles away, she slips a little cyanide into the sugar bowl in the breakfast room. The way they had it planned, no one would have known she was ever there."

Donovan nodded. "The bottle in the linen closet could have been planted at any time."

"It was supposed to look like Alycia was the only person who could have done it. If she were convicted of Pete's murder, she couldn't inherit, and Neil would have gotten everything. It must have seemed a stroke of luck when Alycia walked in on Pete and Brandy, with a witness to boot. That made her supposed motive very obvious. They probably thought they had a perfect frame."

Donovan was solemn. "I would have crucified her," he said softly. "I was so sure she'd done it. It was just that stupid mix-up with the forms. . . ."

I didn't say anything, and after several moments he spoke again. His voice was low. "You know, after doing the same job for so many years, you think you always know what's going on. It gets less important to cross the t's and dot the i's. Sure, there are a few unanswered questions, but they seem like details, because you think you know the whole story. . . ."

His voice trailed off in exhaustion. It was a couple of minutes before he spoke again. "Thanks, Morgan. Thanks for pushing this. I'm really glad to know she didn't do it."

I murmured, "I wonder if we ever *will* know the whole story."

"Think you can pin anything on Neil?" Donovan asked.

"I'll try. I'm betting money Brandy's death was no accident. If we can get the Michigan police to reopen that case, if we can trace the money

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

from his accounts to hers, or if I can prove that he bought the cyanide, we might have him."

"Just don't forget," Donovan said, "cross the t's . . ."

"And dot the i's," I finished. "I will."

As I stood to leave, he gestured to me. "One more thing," he said. "Who do you suppose has been sending those letters?"

"I have a hunch," I replied.

When I got back to the office and saw the list of employees of the Corcoran kennels, I had more than a hunch. I knew.

"Were you planning to kill her?" I asked as I stood in front of Manny's desk. "Or just scare her into confessing?"

He glared at me, but he knew better than to say anything. He knew I had nothing that would stand up in court.

"All this time you felt so bad about causing the Winnegar case to blow up in Donovan's face, and when you found out he was dying, you were going to make things right, weren't you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes, you do. When Corcoran told me those dogs would never let a stranger get past them without raising a ruckus, I decided to find out who wasn't a stranger to them. I discovered that another one of your moonlighting jobs was training guard dogs—at Corcoran's. A nice touch, that. Recommending those dogs to Mrs. Winnegar. She was ready to believe Pete's ghost was after her. There was only one problem. She didn't do it. She didn't kill Pete Winnegar."

"Get out of here!"

"In a minute. But first I want to tell you something Donovan told me. It's about policemen who start assuming they know more than the evidence tells them. It's about cops who think they have the right to play God. . . ."

He stood up. "Get out!"

The next morning when I got to work, Holden met me at the door. "Donovan's gone," he said. "Passed away around two o'clock this morning."

"That's too bad," I replied. "Does Manny know?"

"Yeah, and that's the strangest thing."

"What do you mean?"

"When they notified him he'd have to be sworn in as chief this afternoon, he resigned. He said he was too burned out to be a cop anymore. After all these years he finally gets a chance at the top job, and he quits! I guess you never know."

"I guess you don't."

"By the way," Holden said, grinning. "He recommended you for the job." ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Art by Allen Davis

WISH YOU WEREN'T HERE

by Martin Edwards

Twenty-five years after our parting, Jessica still had the waiflike, trusting expression she had worn when she first asked me to commit murder. I stared at the television set, paralysed by disbelief, convinced that I must be hallucinating. Was it another symptom of my illness that I was projecting onto the screen the image I had never forgotten, the face of my first love, the girl who had changed my life?

I blinked hard several times; but then the reporter spoke her name and I knew I had made no mistake. Mrs. Jessica Pollard. *Jessica.* After all these years. The reporter told the story in sombre tones, but I could not absorb the sense of what he was saying. I glanced to right and left, but no one else in the lounge was paying attention. Nick's young nephew and niece were arguing over a game of Scrabble. His sister and her husband were talking to each other in low urgent voices, awaiting the return of the nurse and no doubt steeling themselves for bad news much closer to home than anything from the evening's headline stories.

A few moments later, the newscaster switched to another item: something about the currency markets. I sank back in my chair, my heart thudding. *Jessica.* The passing years had scarcely changed her. I fancied that I could still feel the texture of that fine blond hair against my

©1998 by Martin Edwards

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

fingertips. The old clock on the mantelpiece chimed the quarter-hour. Forty-five minutes to go until the news came up again on the other channel.

Closing my eyes, I recalled my first glimpse of her on that hot August Saturday in Silcombe. I had been peering out from the narrow window of my room on the first floor of Malplaquet House. We had arrived long before any of Mrs. Whelan's other guests; the Malplaquet had no car park and, since my father was determined to secure the prize spot at the front of the building, we had set off from home in what seemed like the middle of the night.

Like the series character of his novels, Martin Edwards is a Liverpool solicitor. The England of which he writes is generally northern in flavor, but in this new story he takes us south to Devon for a glimpse of a British holiday. Mr. Edwards is the author of five novels; the most recent of them in U.S. publication is *Eve of Destruction* (1998). ¶

Mrs. Whelan, who reminded me of a stern governess from a Victorian shocker, had been unimpressed by our early appearance, grumbling that the previous week's residents had vacated their rooms less than half an hour earlier. Our rooms, it seemed, had yet to be made ready by the fat chambermaid who sweated away under Mrs. Whelan's uncompromising supervision. Not even our hostess's admonitions dented Father's good humour; to celebrate his triumph, he led us all in a brisk walk along the promenade, followed by a fish-and-chips lunch at a nearby cafe called the Lobster Pot. After we had returned to the Malplaquet and completed the ritual of unpacking, my father had decided to have what he always called forty winks; I'd been left to my own devices whilst Mother entertained the twins and Anne immersed herself in *The Mill on the Floss*. My parents had paid extra for a room with a view of the sea, but mine was above the kitchen at the back of the building. It was a tiny room with a sloping roof and it overlooked the Malplaquet's backyard and two huge dustbins. On the other side of the wall was a narrow lane which gave access to the guesthouse from the sea road. Cars deprived by our Morris of the opportunity to park at the front for the purpose of unloading were able to stop at the back gate, so that for most guests, their introduction to the Malplaquet involved trudging through Mrs. Whelan's scullery, laden with suitcases and in search of the room in which they would spend the next seven days. It was not, I sensed, the sort of place where anyone ever stayed for a fortnight.

The room was equipped with the basic essentials: worm-eaten wardrobe and drawers, chipped washbasin, and a bed so lumpy that it would have cooled the passion of Abelard and Heloise—assuming that the lovers could have squeezed their bodies onto its narrow mattress in the first place. One area in which Mrs. Whelan made no economies was that of notice writing. Dusty postcards were sellotaped to the wall,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

each bearing bold and uncompromising capital letters and signed E. WHELAN (PROP.). *Give twenty-four hours' notice of order for packed lunches to avoid disappointment,* said one: A better solution, I suspected, might be to eat out at all times. Their tone was, in the main, grim and retributive—*Sachets of tea and hot water are available from reception—a charge will be made owing to misuse*—although I had to admire the optimism of *Gratuities are at guests' discretion.*

I heard a car pull up outside and glanced out of the window. A slightly-built man in his forties was opening the door of a Ford Anglia for a woman with curly blond hair. She smiled so lovingly at him that I found it difficult to believe that they were husband and wife, but any idea I may have had that Mrs. Whelan might be entertaining illicit lovers was dashed when a teenage girl in T-shirt and jeans clambered out from the rear of the car. Whilst the adults started to pull their suitcases from the boot of the car, she sat on the yard wall and took in her surroundings. I gathered from her frown that she did not think much of them and at once I warmed to her. She had a slim, boyish figure and fair hair cut short. Someone else who had been dragged along to Malplaquet House for want of a better alternative. Suddenly she glanced up at the building and our eyes met. Caught in the act of spying on her, I felt myself reddening. And yet there was something in her expression that prevented me from glancing away and striving to hide my embarrassment. Her eyes were large and full of wonder, but their innocence was compromised by the curve of her mouth in a faint smile. It was as if she had recognised a fellow victim of obtuse adults who were foolish enough to consider Malplaquet House a suitable spot for getting away from it all.

The man said something to her and, with a lavish yawn, she clambered down from the wall. I had the impression that the yawn was for my benefit and I felt a sudden surge of excitement. Like myself, she was a reluctant participant in the ritual of the English family holiday. There was a bond between us.

The three of them disappeared through the back door with their luggage, abandoning me to my reverie. I had no experience with girls. My school was single-sex and Anne's friends, who were either compulsive gigglers or teacher's pets, I found uniformly tedious. All that I knew about the facts of life had been picked up from half a dozen lessons from an embarrassed young biology teacher and the usual smutty schoolyard anecdotes. I could admire the physical perfection of a film star such as Julie Christie, but in real life I'd never been attracted to any teenage girl I'd ever met. Until now.

My father looked in on me, refreshed by his sleep and in the mood for a couple of hours of hard holidaymaking before the time came to prepare for the evening meal. Another walk was decided upon; this time in the opposite direction, beyond the little harbour and along the paths which crisscrossed the steep cliffs before returning through the town. Silcombe offered a curving sweep of promenade, a short apology for a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

pier, and a seemingly endless clutter of three- and four-storey buildings, intended as houses for rich Victorians and nowadays pressed into service as hotels for those drawn by the myth of glorious Devon. The previous year we had stayed at Westward Ho! and it had rained nonstop for the whole week. *Wish you were here,* chanted the slogans on the postcards depicting improbable combinations of sand and sunshine. I wished I were anywhere but here.

One of Mrs. Whelan's notices next to the reception desk had informed us that dinner was served at seven o'clock *sharp* and the importance of strict punctuality in the Malplaquet was emphasised by the vigour with which she struck the gong as the nearby church clock began to chime the hour. After dawdling in the bathroom—much to the annoyance of a number of other guests who kept trying the door handle—I found myself at five past taking the stairs two at a time whilst frantically knotting the tie my parents had insisted I should wear. As I turned the corner to go in through the dining room door, I cannoned into the fair-haired girl, who had been studying the noticeboard in the hall. We finished up clutching each other in an attempt to stay upright.

"Sorry," I said breathlessly. Mortified with embarrassment, I released my grip of her shoulders. "Are you all right?"

"Fine," she said, giving me a broad smile. "You're obviously hungry."

Her arms had for a brief moment snaked around my waist. She dropped them to her side, but the smile did not leave her face. I didn't know what to say. "Er—shall we go in?"

"I think we'd better face the music. My parents will be wondering where I've got to. See you again."

She walked briskly into the dining room. Our tables were on either side of an archway, but we were facing each other. Every now and then, I dared to snatch a covert glance in her direction and, to my delight and astonishment, several times she returned my gaze. In any other circumstances, I would have found my first meal in the Malplaquet—roast beef and soggy vegetables, coated with a gallon of gravy in an attempt to conceal the layers of fat on the thin slices of meat—infinitely depressing. But now I lingered over it in the manner of a gourmet sampling a rare delicacy; anything to give me more time to study her. I could not imagine anyone more worth studying. She had changed into a white shirt with short sleeves that revealed slender brown arms. Given the weather we'd had that summer, I guessed that she spent every spare minute out in the garden, soaking up the sun. She did not bother with makeup, but all the same I thought she was ravishing.

Her parents, I noticed, hardly spoke to her and when they did, it seemed to be more as an afterthought. Her replies were monosyllabic. This puzzled me, as did the animation with which her father addressed her mother, a faded forty-year-old with an eager-to-please expression that was in stark contrast to her daughter's self-possessed style. It was my experience that most middle-aged parents had long exhausted all interesting conversational gambits and concentrated on rehearsing old

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

favourites whilst their minds wandered elsewhere. Sometimes their children were the centre of their attention, sometimes the focus for interminable dispute. What was odd about this family was that the fair-haired girl's presence seemed to be treated almost as an encumbrance. Perhaps she felt lonely. As the minutes passed, it began to dawn on me that she had contrived our brief encounter in the hall. It was impossible to believe that she could have had any interest in the contents of Mrs. Whelan's noticeboard. She must have been waiting for me to come downstairs. No wonder she'd shown such composure when I had so clumsily bumped into her.

They finished their meals a few minutes before us and, as they filed out of the room, the girl looked over her shoulder and straight at me. For an instant she raised her eyes to the heavens as if to say: *See what I have to put up with?* Then she was gone. The rest of the evening passed, for me, in a daze. I have a dim recollection of yet another walk with my parents after the twins were put to bed and that Anne stayed in the hotel after complaining that she would rather read her book than trail round the town, with its pervasive smell of fish and its tawdry bargain stores. But I had no cause to be ill-natured and so, no doubt to the surprise of my parents, who seemed to have believed ever since my days in a nappy that I was going through a difficult phase, I made no objection to accompanying them on their ramble round the steep byways of the little resort. Of course, nothing I saw made any impression on me; I could think of nothing but the fair-haired girl, see nothing but the picture of her slim and supple figure in my mind's eye. I was, I happily decided, falling in love.

We arrived back at half nine, well in advance of Mrs. Whelan's eleven o'clock deadline for locking the front door. The tone of the relevant notice made it plain that latecomers who roused her after that time would live to regret their lack of consideration for the proprietress. Before heading upstairs, I glanced briefly through the fussily furnished cubbyhole designated as the guest lounge, in the hope that the girl might be there. It was deserted, but I was not too disappointed; in my state of mind that evening, another meeting with her would have rendered me speechless and I realised I would have presented such an idiotic spectacle that any chance of furthering our acquaintance would have vanished forever. I lay in my bed for at least a couple of hours before finally drifting to sleep, my imagination running riot as I shed my adolescent inhibitions and swept her off her feet with my virile charm.

Breakfast the next morning offered an opportunity of renewing our acquaintance and, back in the real world, I found my skin tingling as I raced down the stairs a full five minutes before the gong sounded. Again she was there, this time with her head bent over a leaflet extolling the virtues of the National Trust. But I felt sure that she had never voluntarily visited a National Trust property or garden in her life.

Whilst I struggled to recall the wittily seductive greetings I'd composed the previous night, she saved me the trouble by saying, "Hello

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

again. We must stop meeting like this or people will begin to talk. My name's Jessica, by the way. Jessica Dowman. What's yours?"

"Rob . . . Robert," I stammered.

My expression of inane wonderment would have been enough to cause most people to fear for my sanity and flee, but she simply said, "Glad to meet you. Quite hot already, isn't it? Mum says the forecast is very good. Are you going to take advantage of it?"

"I . . . I suppose so." I swallowed. "Yes. Definitely."

"That's good. We'll be in and around the park and Hillside Gardens most of the morning. What about you?"

"I think so," I said, desperate to prolong the conversation.

"Might see you later, then," she said with a grin, and disappeared into the dining room a split second before Mrs. Whelan emerged from the Stygian recesses of the kitchen to beat hell out of the luckless gong.

All through breakfast, I could not keep my eyes off Jessica. This time, though, she seemed to be absorbed in her meal and did not return my glances. Once more I noticed that her parents paid little attention to her; they still had eyes only for each other. At their age, too: It was very odd.

"Are you all right, old man?" my father inquired genially, noticing that I had not touched either my bacon or the messy mound which passed for a fried egg.

"Yes, fine," I said. Then an idea occurred to me. "Well, as a matter of fact, I had a bit of an upset stomach when I woke up this morning. It isn't anything serious, I'm sure of that, but I think I ought to take it easy this morning."

"You never do anything else," Anne muttered.

My parents exchanged looks. "Do you need me to get you anything?" my mother asked.

"Honestly, it's nothing much. No need to make a fuss."

"Only we were planning to have a trip out to Barnstaple this morning," my father said. "But if you're not fit . . ."

"You go without me," I offered bravely. "All I need is a rest and I'd quite like the chance to finish the Graham Greene I started last night. By this afternoon, I'll be right as rain."

And so it was agreed. I would be left to my own devices for the morning while the rest of the family headed off to explore the delights of Barnstaple. From the entrance hall, I watched the car leave the prized parking spot and then hurried in the direction of Hillside Gardens. I found myself a bench near the tearooms which offered an excellent vantage point for observing the comings and goings of Silcombe's visitors and waited for Jessica to appear.

Sure enough, within half an hour, I saw her with her parents, walking along the road which led up to the gardens. She was wearing a canary-yellow cotton shirt and jeans; the shirt was tied in a knot, revealing a tanned stomach. Even at a distance, she was infinitely alluring. They stopped outside the low building which housed the local history museum and a brief discussion took place. It seemed as if Jessica's

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

father was chastising her. In any event, they split up: Jessica's parents went in through the museum entrance, while she began to move towards me. A few moments later, she spotted me and smiled with pleasure. I waved back and congratulated myself on the perfect working of my plan.

"Made it," she said as she reached my bench and flopped down breathlessly beside me. "Gosh, that's a steep climb. Well, here I am. I thought I'd never get away. What happened to your people?"

In stumbling sentences, I told her about my ruse. She laughed uproariously. "Clever. You *look* clever."

In the mouths of some girls, that could have been an insult. But there was a sincerity about her manner that convinced me that she genuinely admired the effort I had made to see her. "What about your folks? Were you having a row?"

"We have them all the time," she assured me. "Peter and I are like fire and water. We simply don't mix."

"Peter?"

"My stepfather-to-be. He and Mum are getting married in the autumn. Mum's idea for this holiday was that we all could get used to being together. But they only have eyes for each other, and besides, who would want to get used to being with a creep like that?"

"What's wrong with him?"

She glared at me and I realised it had been an unwise question. "I don't know where to begin. I could spend all day listing his faults. He expects Mum to be at his beck and call all the time and, like a fool, she does whatever he tells her to do. I make fun of him and he can't bear that. He says I'm spoiled, that I need discipline." Her brow clouded. "He threatened to put me across his knee last week. I tell you, he's like a dirty old man."

I was shocked. "Have you told your mother about this?"

"Oh, it would make no difference. She thinks the sun shines out of him. Says she was stuck in a rut before she met him. But she forgets, we were happy together until he turned up. It was never easy after Dad died, but we coped."

"I'm sorry," I said, feeling inadequate.

Suddenly she gave me a dazzling smile. "You're the first nice thing that's happened to me for ages. So who are you, Robert? Tell me about yourself."

And so I did. An account of the short life and unexciting times of Robert Harrison took no more than ten minutes, during which we wandered along the curving paths and I bought us each an ice cream cone. She listened with every appearance of rapt attention. I was suitably flattered. All at once I'd discovered the joy of being gazed upon with fascination by a pretty blonde. Life, I thought happily to myself, would never be the same again.

All too soon it was time for lunch, but I had determined my course of action. I wanted to spend my holiday with Jessica, not with my parents

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and three tiresome siblings, and I told myself there was no earthly reason to feel ashamed about that. I was sixteen years old, for heaven's sake! Some people of my age were married. I could at least be allowed time alone with my first girlfriend.

I said something of this to Jessica, and to my delight she said that she felt exactly the same. Her mother and the odious Peter would be glad to be rid of her, she was sure, so that they could pursue their third-rate romance without interruption. She was sick of the sight of the man mauling her mother and equally sickened that her mother was all too willing to put up with it.

"Talk about love is blind," she said derisively. "She's making a fool of herself. I'm ashamed of her."

For a moment I felt for Mrs. Dowman; I could all too easily imagine making a fool of myself over Jessica. But the prospect did not bother me one bit.

We set off for the hotel, but inevitably we were a few minutes late. My parents were chafing with impatience when I returned and Anne was in a particularly odious mood.

"Hello, Lazarus. Discovered a miracle cure, then?"

Evidently she had seen me holding Jessica's hand as we approached the Malplaquet. I'd toyed with the idea of giving her a quick kiss as we parted, but at the last moment my nerve had failed. I decided to brazen it out.

"As a matter of fact, I felt much better a few minutes after you left. I thought it might be a good idea to stretch my legs and, as it happened, I bumped into someone who is staying here."

"I see," my father said, and I'm sure he did. His amused tolerance was much more irritating than my mother's frown of disapproval.

"Her name's Jessica. She is very pleasant," I said firmly. "She suggested that she and I might take a look at the museum this afternoon. I gather it's very strong on local history. It may help me with my A-Level course."

This was an outrageous lie, of course, but I had made my point, a point that I should have made a long time before. I was no longer their little boy, but a young man with a mind and life of my own. And so it was settled. Jessica and I were a couple and that was how we would remain throughout that holiday. Unless—the thought pierced me like a sword thrust—she became tired of my banal conversation and started looking for other amusements. I'd already sensed her restlessness. She came from a small town in the South Midlands, but she was imaginative and ambitious. Whatever she saw in me for the time being, I feared that her eyes might soon light on someone new.

I need not have worried. We became inseparable. Her mother—and even the wretched Peter—would speak to me pleasantly enough but they were, as Jessica had predicted, more than happy to leave her to her own devices, while my parents proved unexpectedly indulgent. And so we spent the long summer hours with just each other for company. Together we investigated every inch of Silcombe and, as the sun burned down upon us, even the tackiest corners of the resort seemed to be

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

bathed in a golden haze. Within a couple of days I began to forget that I had ever been elsewhere. My world was confined to the small town, with its Masonic temple, cinema converted to a bingo hall, and the Dixieland Showbar on the pier. We lingered over pots of tea in cheap cafes and haunted the shops which traded in fudge and clotted cream. Jessica insisted that we take a donkey ride on the beach; in any other circumstances, I would have hotly refused to embarrass myself in such a childish pastime, but with her it seemed a natural thing to do and we finished up laughing wildly and being urged by the man in charge to dismount so that the little kids could at last have a chance.

Every other shop and stall in the main street or on the front had its own rack of risqué postcards. In those innocent days, the cheerful vulgarity of the cards, with their unsubtle innuendoes and crude artwork, seemed to represent the ultimate in freedom of expression. Jessica could not pass them without pausing to read the jokes and give me an amused nudge. On the Tuesday afternoon of our holiday, a pun based on the enormous dimensions of a young redhead's boobs prompted her to say with mock sorrow, "Pity I'm so flat-chested. No wonder the boys at home never look twice at me."

I stared at her. She was the loveliest thing I'd ever seen. "They must be blind. And mad."

"Do you mean that? Do you find me attractive? I mean, *really* attractive?"

I had been so timid that I'd not dared to progress with our physical relationship beyond a goodnight brush of my lips against her cheek. But I knew that soon I would have to make a decision. A week was so short and I could not face the prospect of losing her once it was over. Stumbling over my words, I tried to explain how much I cared for her and, as I did so, a slow smile spread across her face. Before I had finished she put her arms around me and gave me a long and loving kiss. As our tongues touched for the first time, I told myself that I must never let her go.

Now there was no need for us to talk anymore. She led me by the hand up through Hillside Gardens to the top of the cliffs overlooking the Irish Sea. We veered off the path and found ourselves a quiet spot behind a large boulder where we were likely to remain undisturbed.

After a little while, she said, "What's wrong?"

"I don't know." I was bewildered, as well as humiliated. "It's just . . . it's just that it doesn't feel right."

I'd thought she might taunt me, but she was gentle and considerate. "It's all right, darling. It's not your fault. I'm tense as well. You see . . . "

"Yes?"

She hesitated. "There's something I haven't told you. And even now, I'm not sure . . ."

"We said we wouldn't have any secrets from each other."

"Yes, we did, but this is—so personal. And it's so terrible, as well."

"Tell me. Please."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"It's Peter. One day in June, Mum had gone out to the supermarket and he turned up at home. The two of us were alone together for the first time."

"What happened?"

Slowly, painfully, she told me. I was horrified by her story of what he had done to her and of her frantic reaction. She showed me the faint marks where she had cut her wrists. It had not been a serious suicide attempt, but rather an act of desperation. She'd told her mother and the doctors that she'd been worrying about school. As she began to weep, I clasped her to my chest and tried to calm her. "I won't let him harm you again. I promise, I'll protect you."

"How can you?"

"You must tell your mother the truth. If you don't, I will. She'll throw him out and call the police."

She shook her head. "You don't understand. She's besotted with him. He's an accomplished liar, he could charm the birds off the trees. She'll never believe he would do me any harm."

Eventually, we dressed again and made our way back towards the hotel. I did not want her even to have to eat with the man again, but she insisted that she had to face him. She would not give him the satisfaction of thinking that she was terrified of him. We'd arranged to see each other again after the evening meal and as I left the dining room, the man had the temerity to give me a friendly wave. My expression must have made clear my contempt for him.

"What are we to do?" I asked as we walked past the deserted bandstand in the park.

"I had an idea," she said slowly.

"Go on."

"No, it's impossible. You'll hate me for even suggesting it."

"Jessica, that's nonsense. Tell me. What was your idea?"

She stopped next to a bench which bore a plaque in memory of a long-dead native of Silcombe, someone who had, it said, spent many happy hours there. Probably when he should have been at work.

"You won't like it," she said at length.

I sat down and pulled her close to me. "Try me."

"I was thinking . . . suppose Peter was out of the way."

"That's what we need. If your mother . . ."

"No, no. I told you, she'll never dump him. The only way she'll ever be saved from him is if he disappears from her life permanently. God, it's the opposite of those corny postcards. I wish he *wasn't* here."

We both laughed and then she said slowly, "If he had some sort of accident, perhaps . . ."

I was puzzled. "Accident?"

"Yes." She hesitated. "Suppose—just suppose—something happened to him." She pointed towards the cliff. "If he fell into the sea, for instance."

"Wishful thinking."

She wriggled round and looked me in the eye. "It doesn't have to be."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I stared at her. "Surely you aren't suggesting . . ."

She put her hand on my thigh. "Don't look so shocked, darling. It was only last night that you said you would do anything for me."

At first I could hardly believe that she was not merely indulging in some idle daydream, but soon I realised that she was serious. She wanted him dead and she had thought long and hard about how to achieve her aim.

Her plan was simple. The following evening, she would arrange to meet him on the loneliest part of the cliffs, not far from the spot where she and I had first kissed. There seemed to be no doubt in her mind that, for all his attentiveness to her mother, he would not be able to resist her invitation. He would think up some excuse to make to Mrs. Dowman to explain his absence, while Jessica would say she and I were off to the cinema on our final night together. I was to hide behind one of the large boulders on the clifftop near the place of the rendezvous and when his back was turned, I would come out, hit him over the head, and pitch him into the sea. Although I was slightly built, so was he and I would have the advantage of surprise. As for my weapon, she suggested I steal a golf club from the pitch and putt course in Hillside Gardens. She'd seen a couple of youths do precisely that a couple of days earlier; the incident had helped to give her the idea. After killing him, I was to return to the town centre as fast as possible; we would pretend that we'd changed our mind about the film and spent the evening walking round the centre of Silcombe. Waitresses and shopkeepers would help to give us alibis. By the time we returned to the hotel, Mrs. Dowman would be in a state of alarm, but we would act the part of innocents.

She even practised her act of bewilderment when the news was broken to her of Peter's tragic death. "I can't believe it," she kept saying. "He seemed so *alive.*" It was a perfect piece of acting.

"When it's all over," she said, taking my hand in hers, "everything will be perfect. Mum will be free of him and we can all live happily ever after."

I was too confused and shaken to manage a coherent response. She'd timed her overture well: If I refused to help, I faced the certainty of losing her and yet I had less than twenty-four hours to think things through for myself and try to make her see that murder was never the answer to anyone's prayers.

The rest of that evening and our time together the following day is a blur in my memory. I was torn between my desperate longing for her love and my horror at the prospect of killing a fellow human being—no matter how much he might deserve it. My parents wondered if I was going down with a bug, although Anne said my only ailment was likely to be lovesickness once the holiday was over. Each time I tried to persuade Jessica that there must be another solution to our difficulty, she brushed aside my awkward protestations. Lack of confidence was not one of her weaknesses; she knew the depth of my feelings for her and she was confident that lust would overcome scruple, as it so often does.

❖ ❖ ❖

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

And so, at half-past eight on the Friday evening, I found myself stationed behind the boulder as my girlfriend and co-conspirator had instructed, nervously clutching the means of murder. We had played a couple of holes of pitch and putt that afternoon and absconded with a golf club as soon as no one was looking in our direction. I closed my eyes and imagined the sensation of bringing the weapon down on the back of the man's head. Jessica had assured me that the wound would cause no suspicion; it was nothing compared to the damage that the rocks and sea would do.

I heard him approach the clifftop and peeped out from behind the outcrop. He was puffing slightly from the exertion of the climb and he looked old as well as tired; the familiar self-satisfied smile was nowhere to be seen. The sight of him shook me. I had expected him to be jaunty and confident, blissfully ignorant of the fate that lurked around the corner. It was so much easier to hate someone like that. My palms were sweaty, my stomach churning. I forced myself to remember everything Jessica had told me. Such a bestial man did not deserve to walk the earth. And yet, as I watched him looking around for her, the truth struck me like a flash of lightning in an electric storm. It was simply impossible. I could not bring myself to creep out from my hiding place, raise the putter, and smash him with it. No matter what the cost, I could not destroy him.

And I saw all too clearly what the cost would be. If I failed Jessica in this, it would be the end for us. At that moment, I realised how weak and unworthy I was: a coward unable to perform one single service for the girl he loved. God alone knew what further wickednesses Peter would perpetrate if he were allowed to live. Jessica had trusted me to become her saviour and I was about to let her down.

I gave him one last glance. He was peering at his watch and stamping his feet impatiently. I ducked back out of sight and, as quietly as I could, began to slither down the stretch of grass which led from the back of the outcrop to a path twenty yards below. Once on the level, I raced towards the town. We had agreed to meet in Cornmarket and I was frantic in my anxiety to explain why I had broken my promise to become a murderer. Maybe there was still a chance that she would see sense and accept that I had not so much lost my nerve as been unable to lose my humanity.

She was not there. I waited for twenty minutes and then began to roam the town, searching all the nooks and crannies we had visited during our week of bliss. No sign of her.

I arrived back at the Malplaquet five minutes before locking-up time. On the way in I bumped into Mrs. Dowman. She gave me a nervous smile.

"Just taking a breath of air before I turn in," she said. "I'm sorry your last evening with Jessica was spoiled."

That's one way of putting it, I reflected. "How . . . how is she?"

"Well, she doesn't seem to be running a temperature. I gather she

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

started feeling sick as soon as you arrived at the cinema, so it was sensible for her to come straight back to the hotel. I've been sitting with her, watching television. But I think I have two invalids on my hands now." She gave me her sad faded smile. "Peter went out for a walk while I was doing the packing this evening and when he came back he said he had a raging headache. The two of them looked pretty seedy and they both rushed off to bed with hardly a word. Oh dear. Still, it's been a lovely week, hasn't it?"

"Yes," I said slowly, "it has."

Mrs. Dowman seemed keen to talk. Even in my confusion, I had an impression of a woman who had felt lonely for a long time. "All good things must come to an end, I suppose. Anyway, it doesn't do to get miserable. I've been pleased to meet you, Robert. And thanks for keeping Jessica company. She's had her problems, as you may have gathered, but I think she's starting to get over them."

"Problems?" I said cautiously.

"I'm sure she's explained to you about losing her father. Even though we knew he had a weak heart, his death still came as a shock to us. He and Jessica had their quarrels—after all, he was a good fifteen years older than me and he did have rather traditional ideas about how children should behave. But she was heartbroken after he died and this is the first holiday we've had since then. Of course, I've met Peter and I'm trying to carve a new life for myself. But we've both been worried about Jessica. I know she doesn't care much for him or the idea of becoming a vicar's daughter."

I goggled at her. "What?"

She sighed. "Oh dear, hasn't she told you? Yes, Peter used to work in industry, but a few years ago he had a complete change of tack."

"But he doesn't wear a dog collar!"

"It's not compulsory. But I wish Jessica had told you. I hope she doesn't feel—ashamed of Peter. He's a good man, you know, and he will make an excellent stepfather. But perhaps it was too much to expect that everything would be plain sailing. I blame myself, you know. I've been so bound up with Peter, I suppose I haven't given Jessica as much time as she deserves. So I'm relieved as well as delighted that she's found a friend at last." She smiled again. "Do you think perhaps—the two of you may write to each other afterwards?"

Embarrassed as well as bewildered, I mumbled something vague and escaped upstairs to my room. I threw myself onto the lumpy bed and at last allowed myself to weep. So Jessica had deceived me. She'd lied about everything: her father, Peter, her feelings for me. I could not guess the subterfuge she had employed to lure Peter to the cliff top. I was only sure of one thing: that he was an innocent man. I'd been her dupe and, if I had done her bidding, she would have made sure that our paths never crossed again.

My father was as keen to make an early start on the journey home as he had been on the outward trip. Mrs. Whelan grudgingly provided tea

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and toast at half-past six and we breakfasted alone. The twins were fractious, Anne was sleepy, and I had nothing whatever to say. I was consumed with bitterness for the way I had been used. The car was loaded and we were on our way not long after seven. Of course there was no sign of Mrs. Dowman, Peter, or Jessica. I wondered about her reaction when she realised that Peter was still alive. Knowing her—and, at last, I felt I was starting to do just that—she would have been outraged, feeling a sense of betrayal every bit as acute as my own.

She was the first and last girl I ever kissed, and I never holidayed in England again. The following spring, I met Roger at a cricket match and a great deal that I had never understood about myself suddenly fell into place. He and I went to France together and learned about love. My infatuation for Jessica soon seemed inexplicable. During that strange week in Silcombe, I had been deceived not only by her but also by myself.

But I have never become much better at picking people with whom to fall in love. It is a failing which might have led to murder and will soon be the death of me. A boy I met in a bar a few years ago had been struck by disease and passed it on to me before he saw fit to mention his condition. And that is why I was lying on a reclining chair in the lounge at St. Clement's when I saw Jessica again on television. I waited patiently for the news to come up again on the other channel—although three quarters of an hour is a long time when one has perhaps a month left of life.

This time I paid attention. The gist of the story was that a junior minister in the government had been killed. During the parliamentary recess, he and his wife had taken a short holiday at a resort on the east coast. It seemed that he had set off one evening for a short walk while his wife stayed at their luxurious hotel, suffering from a migraine. Apparently he had fallen from a cliff; his body had just been recovered. Jessica, his widow, was being brave and saying what a fine man her husband had been. The minister's constituency agent, a handsome young fellow in a smart suit, stood at her side. He put a hand on her shoulder for a moment, in a tender attempt to offer comfort. His head was bowed as he murmured that the deceased would be a great loss, not only to those whom he had represented, but also to the nation.

Jessica turned to the camera again. "I can't believe it," she said. "He seemed so—so *alive.*"

I banged my fist on the remote control and the television picture vanished. The two other residents in the room gave me a startled glance, but something in my expression made them turn their heads away.

I was wondering again about the choice I had made as I skulked behind that boulder on the cliff top. Suppose I had decided differently?

It's no use, I told myself, *you can't rewrite history. You are what you are. And always have been.*

And of course, that is the truth. I must accept it. However much I wish I weren't here. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Liverpool Kiss

by Edward D. Hoch

Although Nick Velvet, thief of valueless objects, is the most popular of Edward D. Hoch's series characters, British spy Jeffrey Rand also has a following, as we know from interested reader letters. Unfortunately, the thirty-four years of adventures Rand has appeared in in *EQMM* have been encapsulated in only one collection, the 1974 paperback *The Spy and the Thief*; only EQMM carries his new cases.

"I've been retired too long," Rand said, grumbling over breakfast as Leila slipped into her raincoat and tucked the briefcase under her arm.

"Why's that?" she asked, glancing at her watch as she silently calculated the time it would take to drive to the first class she taught at Reading University.

"Nothing to do, and you're going off for a day's work."

"A day and a night. Remember, tonight's when we're having the all-nighter at the university library. I'm one of the chaperones."

Rand sighed, feeling sorry for himself. "Do you really believe university men and women will spend all night at the library studying?"

"It's for National Libraries Week, you know that! And it doesn't matter how much they study, so long as they come."

Rand decided to use the time to work on his memoirs, often begun but never completed. But he'd barely sat down at the computer when the phone rang. He answered it to hear a woman's voice. "Is this Mr. Rand?"

"Yes."

"I'm sure you won't remember me. My name is Vesper O'Shea. I accompanied you to the opera one night."

"I remember it very well. *La Gioconda,* wasn't it?"

"You have a good memory. It was more than a decade ago."

"I don't see that many operas."

Her voice had taken on the youthful lilt he remembered from that night. She'd been a code clerk in her twenties at the time, working in Rand's old department at British Intelligence, Concealed Communications. He'd been called out of retirement to contact one of the cast members before the opera company went on tour behind the Iron Curtain. When Leila was unable to accompany him as his wife, Double-C

©1998 by Edward D. Hoch

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

had helpfully filled the role with Vesper O'Shea. Leila's only comment had been, "Her name alone is enough to make me jealous!"

"Are you still with the office?" he asked Vesper, careful not to say too much.

"Oh, everything's reorganized now. You must have heard about it."

"Some things, yes," Rand admitted. "What can I do for you, Vesper?"

She hesitated, then plunged ahead. "I'm calling from Liverpool. I'm in a bit of a mess and I thought you might help me out. I didn't know who else to call."

"What do you need?"

"Is there any possibility you could come to Liverpool?"

"When?"

"Now! Today!"

"I'm afraid that would be—"

"I really need help, Mr. Rand. I'm sorry I can't tell you any more over the phone, but it's an urgent matter."

Remembering that Leila wouldn't be home till morning, he sighed and glanced at his watch. It was not yet ten o'clock. "Where are you now?"

"At the Liverpool airport."

With his free hand he flipped through the airline schedule he always kept handy. "All right," he decided. "I could get a flight that arrives there at 1:55. Will you still be at the airport then?"

She laughed without humor. "I may be here for the rest of my life."

Rand phoned the university and left a voice mail message for Leila, saying he had been called away on urgent business for his old employer. He didn't mention Vesper's name. Then he drove to the airport and caught the next plane to Liverpool. He'd been there only once, years back, and his impression was of a massive seaport where ferries to Ireland competed for space with cargo ships bound halfway round the world. Flying into the airport on the north bank of the Mersey River, he thought of the Beatles at a time when he and they were all a lot younger.

He recognized her at once as he left the jetway with his overnight bag. She must have been in her late thirties but she was still the Vesper O'Shea he recalled from their night at the opera. Attractive, intelligent, and just a bit shy. "Good to see you again, Vesper," he said with a smile.

"Mr. Rand, thank you so much for coming."

"I think you can call me Jeffrey."

"Have you had lunch?"

He shook his head. "I never eat airline food if I can avoid it."

"Come with me. There's a pretty good pub here at the airport."

She led him to a place called the Merseyside, on the upper level with a good view of the airfield and the river. They chose a corner table away from the bar and ordered beer and sandwiches. Seated across from Rand, she studied him and then said, "You haven't changed much in ten years."

"Thanks, but I've grown older and put on some weight. The calendar and the scale don't lie. Now tell me about yourself. What's the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

big problem that got me up here?"

"As you know, the old Double-C no longer exists in that form. Messages are enciphered by computer these days. I now perform a sort of courier duty, traveling with packages that require special attention. This morning I flew in from Dublin. We landed here rather than in London for security reasons. My package was fairly heavy, several hundred sheets of paper. I'm sorry I can't tell you any more about it."

"Why wasn't it transmitted by fax over a secure line?"

"These days there are no secure lines. I arranged to have it shipped in a Bank of England money chest, which is about as safe as you can get."

Rand could already see it coming. "Tell me what happened."

"Every so often the Irish banks send back British pounds that they've accumulated. The containers are sealed orange boxes made of high-impact plastic that floats, with radio beepers so they'll be found if the plane crashes. The boxes are about twenty inches square, maybe sixteen inches deep. The papers I was accompanying were in one of those boxes."

"And without the knowledge of your superiors, I'd guess. Otherwise you wouldn't have called me."

Vesper averted her eyes. "I remembered you were very good at solving puzzles."

"When the box was opened, your papers were missing."

"Worse than that. The box itself was missing. There were two of them, one full of pound notes of various denominations, the other about half full. There could have been nearly a million pounds in all, though my half-full box probably contained no more than a third of a million."

"Tell me all the details, from the beginning," Rand suggested.

Vesper searched through her purse for a cigarette but finally changed her mind. "I haven't been smoking," she confessed. "I guess this is a bad day to start again." She brushed her dark hair back nervously and Rand decided she was even more attractive than he'd remembered. "Where was I? Oh, yes—the boxes. My material, about the size of a ream of paper, went easily into the second orange box. I watched it being packed, right on top of the wrapped currency. My friend, a Dublin banker with close ties to both governments, locked and sealed the boxes in my presence. I traveled in the van with them to the airport, and personally watched them being loaded into the special cargo compartment of the Boeing 767."

"A large plane for such a short flight," he commented.

"It stops in Liverpool and then flies on to Berlin."

"You actually watched the loading of this special compartment?"

"I did. Both boxes were in it."

"The compartment could not be reached from inside the plane?"

"No, only from outside. They took off shortly after I boarded it, and from my window seat I would have noticed anyone approach the compartment and open it while we were on the runway."

"What time was this?"

"The plane took off a bit after eight and we were here by nine. The

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

flight takes less than an hour. I immediately went down to the baggage room to watch for the orange money chests. Only one was unloaded. The baggage handlers insisted that's all there was. I wanted to see for myself, but they were right. There's no hiding a big orange box. Somehow it disappeared in the air over the Irish Sea, between Dublin and Liverpool. London doesn't know it's missing yet, and I can't tell them. Is there any possibility you can find it for me, Jeffrey?"

Women had been asking him for favors all his life, it seemed, and he'd never turned one down yet. He'd done a favor for Leila in Cairo and ended up marrying her. Vesper O'Shea's first thought on realizing the money box had disappeared was to call him, even though they hadn't spoken in a decade.

"Getting it back is not something I can promise, but I'll try. Obviously one or more of the baggage handlers must be involved somehow."

"I only saw two in Dublin. Here there was a crew of four assigned to unload the luggage, cargo, and mail compartments." She produced a little notebook. "Here, I jotted down their names. Needless to say, Scotland Yard is already looking into the missing money chest, but no one knows about the documents."

"Yes, the documents." Rand looked into her pale eyes. "Vesper, if you want me to help find them, you're going to have to give me a better idea of what these sheets of paper contain."

She was silent for a moment, weighing her options. Finally she replied. "All I can tell you is that they are computer printouts of names and addresses, secret membership lists of certain factions in the Irish troubles. The lists are quite complete. You must understand why they couldn't be trusted to transmission by fax. They had to be hand-carried, and I was the hand. Not a very trustworthy one, I'm afraid."

He saw the despair in her eyes. She was staring hard at the end of her career in government service, or possibly even a prison sentence if she had disobeyed some specific regulation in attempting to transport the papers as she did. "Let's look at these names," he said, picking up her notebook from the table.

Fitz Fitzpatrick
Alfred Russell
Brian Cleaver
Mohammed Bey

"Usually they work in teams of two," Vesper explained. "Fitzpatrick and Cleaver unloaded the small cargo compartment where the boxes were."

"Have you told anyone about this besides me?"

"Only Simon Corcoran, my friend at the Dublin bank. He had to know that his money chest had gone missing. He's flying over on the afternoon plane."

Rand had finished his beer and sandwich, and he saw that Vesper had eaten all she intended to. "Is the plane still here?" he asked.

She nodded. "When the airline discovered the money chest was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

missing, they shifted the few through-passengers to another plane for the flight to Berlin."

"Take me down there."

"How should I introduce you?"

"Insurance investigator. There are always insurance investigators."

They went down to the baggage claim area and Vesper introduced him to a burly red-haired Irishman named Fitzpatrick who seemed to be in charge. Rand remembered that his name had been at the top of the list. "Some of us used to be merchant seamen," the man explained. "Not near as much hassle as unloading these babies."

"Mr. Rand is from the insurance company," Vesper told him. "He wants to ask you a few questions."

"I already talked to someone from Scotland Yard."

"Our investigation is separate from theirs," Rand explained. "It'll only take a few minutes of your time, Mr. Fitzpatrick."

"Call me Fitz. Everyone does."

"All right, Fitz. Could you tell me everything that happened from the minute the aircraft from Dublin touched down?"

"We use a little train of baggage carriers, pulled by an electric cart. The four of us ride it out to the plane when it reaches the jetway."

"Which compartment did you open first?"

"Mohammed and Al went right to the passengers' luggage. Brian and I opened the special compartment."

"Anything unusual there?"

The big Irishman shrugged. "Insured packages and a diplomatic pouch, any important cargo. The orange box was unusual, but we've seen 'em before."

"There was only one orange box?"

"That's right, just one."

"I'd like to see all the cargo you removed from the special compartment. Is it being held somewhere?"

Vesper answered him. "I believe Scotland Yard is still holding everything while they investigate."

Fitzpatrick led them deeper into the cargo area until they reached a corner that was blocked off with yellow crime-scene tape. A uniformed officer stood guard over some two dozen parcels of all sizes, including one orange plastic box. There was also a large post-office sack made of strong woven plastic. Printed on it was the message: *MBX 1997 GREAT BRITAIN POST.* A large diplomatic pouch addressed to the Irish Embassy in London was also part of the cargo. Rand wondered why it hadn't been put on a flight to London.

"Are the other baggage handlers here?" Rand asked.

Fitz shook his head. "Not our crew. We work from six till three and then the evening shift comes on."

It was just after three o'clock. "Have they gone home already?"

"More likely gone to the Flag and Dragon pub down by the docks. We got some buddies who are merchant seamen."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A middle-aged man in a blue suit walked over to join them. Vesper had already met him but he introduced himself to Rand. "I'm Inspector Foster from Scotland Yard, assisting in the investigation here. Are you the friend Miss O'Shea was expecting?"

"That's right. Jeffrey Rand." They shook hands.

"This is an odd sort of case. I'm not certain any crime has been committed, at least not on British soil. I can't speak for Dublin, of course."

Vesper bristled. "I can speak for Dublin. I saw those two money chests being loaded aboard, and I flew here with them. Now one is missing. When Simon Corcoran arrives here on the next plane he'll verify that."

Foster considered that. "I'll be anxious to meet with Mr. Corcoran."

As he walked away with Fitzpatrick, Vesper let out her breath. "From the moment I introduced myself he's been on me. I have an Irish name and therefore I must be somehow involved. I'm not to be trusted."

"Does he know of your government connection?"

"I told him I was accompanying the money chests as a courier."

Rand glanced at his watch. "What time does Corcoran's plane land?"

"In about twenty minutes, at three forty-five."

"Let's go meet him."

Simon Corcoran wore a blue suit almost identical to Foster's. Otherwise they were as different as a Scotland Yard inspector and an Irish banker could be. Corcoran was a jovial man in his early forties whose sharp eyes gave the only hint that he was not on holiday. Despite Rand's presence, he and Vesper hugged and exchanged kisses as he came off the jetway carrying an overnight bag.

"I'm glad you're here, Simon. This is my friend Jeffrey Rand."

"Vesper has mentioned you," the banker said. "Looks as if we've got ourselves a mess here."

"It's a problem," Rand admitted.

"An impossible problem, if you ask me."

They went down to the cargo area together and Corcoran inspected the remaining orange box. "This serial number shows it's the first box, filled with banknotes. The second box is the missing one."

"I'd already established that. Could you open it to be sure?"

The banker signed a receipt and proved his identity to the satisfaction of Inspector Foster. The orange box was taken into a secure office and Corcoran used two keys to open the double lock. "High-impact plastic," he pointed out to Rand, "with a water-activated radio transmitter to send a signal in the event of a crash."

He opened the lid to reveal wrapped packages of pounds sterling in various denominations. It took him only a moment to establish everything was in order. He closed and double-locked the case. "They weren't after your money," Vesper said. "They were after my papers."

"We can't be sure of that," Corcoran told her. He turned to Rand. "Any ideas about this?"

"One or two. I need to speak with the other baggage handlers who

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

were on duty. I understand they've left for the day now."

"I can take you to the Flag and Dragon," Vesper offered. "I know where it is."

Simon Corcoran rested a hand lightly on her shoulder. "It looks as if I'll be staying overnight. I'll check into the hotel."

They left the office and Corcoran went on his way. The money chest was stored in the airport vault until an armored car arrived to pick it up. "Do you want to head for the pub now?" Vesper asked.

"Just one thing." Rand walked over to the area where Inspector Foster stood with the aircraft's cargo. "Are you planning to release these?" he asked.

"I may hold them until morning," Foster replied.

"Could I examine the large packages a little more closely first?"

The tag on the Great Britain Post bag carried a Liverpool name and address. Through the plastic mesh he could just make out a large box but it was gray, not orange. The diplomatic pouch was a different matter. The leather sack was opaque, with no chance of seeing anything inside. It might have held a small body for all Rand could tell, and he seemed to remember a time during the Cold War when that exact thing had occurred. "All right," he told the Scotland Yard man, and followed Vesper out of the airport.

The Flag & Dragon was located on Strand Street near the Canning Dock, some distance from the airport. When Rand and Vesper arrived, Fitz Fitzpatrick was seated in a booth with two other men. He got up to offer his seat, pulling over a chair for himself at the end of the booth. "This here's Al Russell and Brian Cleaver, two of the chaps I work with."

Rand shook their hands, noting that Cleaver was missing the little finger of his left hand. Russell was the more sociable of the two, immediately ordering beers for Vesper and Rand. "They're here about the missing money box," Fitz told him.

"Oh! And we're suspected, I suppose."

"Not at all," Vesper lied with a straight face. "But if you know anything there's a nice reward being offered by the Bank of Ireland."

"How soon after you opened the compartment did you notice the orange box was missing?" Rand asked.

Russell shrugged. "It was Fitz and Cleaver unloaded that one."

"Where's this fourth man, Bey?"

"He stays pretty much with his own people, up at the end of the bar." He motioned toward a group of Indians engaged in a heated conversation.

Fitz cleared his throat. "I can answer your question. I didn't notice anything was missing till I checked the manifest. It said two money chests and we only had one. The small packages were all listed, and the diplomatic pouch, but there should have been two boxes for the Bank of England."

"They call them money chests on the manifest?"

"No, just parcels consigned to the Bank of England. But we all know

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

what's in them. When I noticed one was missing I called to Al and Mohammed to check it out."

Cleaver nodded in agreement, his first sign of joining in the conversation. "Al climbed in for a second look but the compartment was empty. Everything was on the baggage cart." He downed the rest of his beer and said, "Gotta get home now. See you guys in the morning."

He slid out of the booth and was gone. "How'd he lose his finger?" Vesper asked.

"Cut off with a cleaver," Fitz replied with a chuckle. "That's his name, get it?" An old joke in the workplace, Rand decided.

Al Russell gave a straight answer. "He got it crushed between two baggage carts, a couple of years back. They couldn't save it. Damned accident changed his life, but not for the better. He broods about it, says that was why his wife left him. Sometimes at night he drinks too much and plays Russian roulette."

Vesper's mouth dropped open. "With a gun?"

"That's the only way you play it. Spin the cylinder and squeeze the trigger. One of these nights his number'll come up."

"Scotland Yard will want to question all of you more about that missing money chest," Rand said. "If you know anything about it, now's the time to speak up."

"The thing was never here," Russell said. "It must have disappeared on the other end."

"I pretty much agree with that," Fitzpatrick told them. "Maybe I'll go see Cleaver tonight and get his thoughts on it."

There was a shout from the bar area and Rand turned to see two of the Indians scuffling with some longshoremen. "Damn!" Russell said with a growl. "They're at it again!"

Fitz and Russell went to break up the fight, which seemed to be a regular thing. "There's lots of this on the docks," Vesper told Rand. "Always has been."

"You know your way around."

"Not well enough. Will you take me back to my hotel?"

"Certainly."

The fight was over as quickly as it had begun. They were introduced to Mohammed Bey, a handsome young East Indian suffering at that moment from a split lip. He patted it with his handkerchief, studying the blood each time. It seemed to genuinely worry him and he asked Fitz, "Should I go to hospital?"

"Hello, no!" Al Russell told him. "Come on, I'll fix you up."

Fitzpatrick shook his head and chuckled. "It's like the old days when I worked on a merchant ship. Every time we got to port there was fights. Liverpool was always one of the worst, but the girls were nice."

They ordered more pints of beer, but Rand and Vesper departed. It was growing dark outside. There was nothing more to be learned about the missing package, at least not from these men. When they reached Vesper's hotel she invited him up to her room. As she slipped the key

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

card from her purse and unlocked the door she decided, "I think I'll order room service. I don't feel like going out again."

"Good idea."

"Want something?"

Rand had walked to the window and was staring out at the rush-hour traffic on Dale Street. "Just the truth."

"What?"

"The truth, Vesper. There are only three possibilities. The package had to be removed before the plane left Dublin, during the flight, or after it landed here in Liverpool. During the flight is a clear impossibility. The special cargo is accessible only from outside the plane. The missing box could not have been removed here, in full view of four people, unless we believe they're all in it together. That leaves Dublin."

"What are you saying?"

"You and Simon Corcoran could be in this together, Vesper. Calling me in for assistance could be just a smoke screen."

"That's crazy!" Her expression had turned hard and defensive.

"Is it? You were stuck at the airport because the box was missing. You hadn't known about that in advance. Yet when we arrived here just now you were already registered and had your room key."

"I was planning to stay overnight in case there was some delay in recovering the papers I was transporting."

"Vesper, no bank president or official in his right mind would allow you to transport secret government papers like that. Not unless you had a special relationship with him. You and Corcoran are lovers, aren't you? The room was booked so you could spend the night together. You left the airport and picked up the key earlier. Corcoran knew all along he'd be coming here; therefore, he knew the money chest would be missing when the plane landed in Liverpool."

"That's not true, Jeffrey, I swear to you!"

"Vesper—"

She came up to him then and placed her hands on his shoulders. "Don't say any more. I'll prove I'm not involved with Simon." She kissed him hard on the mouth.

Rand broke away, feeling the heat on his cheeks. "Please, Vesper. I'm old enough to be your father."

"But you're not, are you?"

He saw the sad smile on her face. What in hell had he gotten himself into? "I have to go now. I'm sorry I couldn't be of more help—"

"Remember me, Jeffrey."

"I'll always remember you. Maybe I can get a room for the night across the street. I'll call you before I leave in the morning."

But she phoned him first, about two hours later, to tell him that one of the baggage handlers, Brian Cleaver, had killed himself.

It took Rand only minutes to get dressed and meet Vesper at her hotel across the street. Though it was only nine o'clock, she looked as if the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

phone had awakened her. "It was Inspector Foster," she explained. "He called with the news and asked me to come to this address."

"Who found the body?"

"Apparently Russell and Fitzpatrick were there when it happened. Cleaver was having another game of Russian roulette and shot himself through the head."

The address was an old apartment building on Bath Street, near Prince's Dock. It had the odor of the waterfront about it. There were police cars out front, and Inspector Foster met them at the door. "It's upstairs here," he told them. "Watch your step. The hall light's pretty dim."

Cleaver's place was a two-room apartment with a sitting room, bedroom, and a dingy bathroom beyond it. He'd shot himself in the bedroom, and Rand could see police technicians working in there. Fitzpatrick and Russell were seated in the small living room with one of the local detectives. "Why did you want me here?" Vesper asked the inspector.

"We found something in his closet and we need to have you identify it." He stepped into the bedroom for a moment and returned carrying a large orange box.

"That's it!" she said at once.

"Take your time, Miss O'Shea. We know it's one of the plastic boxes used as money chests because it's like the one that wasn't stolen. But is it really the missing one? He was using it to store tools and contact paper."

She examined the box more closely. "I don't think this is it," she answered reluctantly. "I dabbed one corner with my lipstick when I put my papers in it, so I could tell the two boxes apart. There's no mark on this box, unless it got rubbed off."

Rand sat down next to Fitz. "What happened?" he asked the big Irishman.

"Al and me decided to stop by and make sure he was all right. When we got here he was talkin' sort of crazy. He said it was time for his Russian roulette. We just laughed but he goes into the bedroom and we hear a shot. Like I said, his number finally came up."

Rand glanced over at Inspector Foster. "Is that what happened?"

"It seems so. The recently fired gun, with one ejected cartridge, was on the floor near his right hand. The fatal shot entered his right temple and judging from the powder burns, it was a contact wound. It could have happened like they say."

"Is there a window in the room?"

"Locked," Foster said.

"A closet where someone could hide?"

"Empty except for a few items of clothing. And that orange box, of course."

"And you two were together when the shot was fired?"

"More or less," Fitz said. "I'd stepped into the bathroom for a minute, but I rushed out when I heard the shot. Al was still in on the sofa."

Russell nodded. "I didn't move."

Inspector Foster made a few notes and said, "The man had an orange

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

box in his closet, similar to the missing one. He may have thought you two were suspicious when you came here tonight, and left it up to fate with one more game of Russian roulette."

A detective came into the room holding a snub-nosed revolver in an evidence bag. "We found a second gun in his dresser drawer, Inspector."

"Bring it along."

Rand opened the bright orange container and looked inside. There were a few tools, as Foster had said, and a rolled sheet of adhesive-backed gray contact paper. Attached to the lid was the water-activated radio transmitter for locating the box in the event of a plane crash at sea.

Suddenly it was all clear to him. "Are the diplomatic pouch and the other packages still at the airport?" he asked Inspector Foster.

He nodded. "They'll go on to their destinations in the morning."

"We'd better get out there."

It was after midnight and the Liverpool airport was all but deserted. In the main passenger terminal the floors were being polished by machine. Downstairs in the baggage area the night crew was mopping the floors. Rand led the way across the wet floor, ignoring the warning signs, pausing only long enough to carry off a pail of soapy water. A woman with a mop yelled at him but he kept going.

"Open it," he told the inspector when they reached the locked strong-room where the overnight baggage was secured.

"I don't have the key."

"Get it, and get a shortwave radio receiver while you're at it."

"What's the water for?"

"You'll see."

Vesper came up to him. "Do you still think Simon and I are involved in this?"

"I hope not. I'm willing to be wrong once in a while."

Inspector Foster appeared with the night baggage manager and the strongroom was unlocked. "Stand aside!" Rand warned, and dumped the pail of water on the plastic mesh sack with the *Great Britain Post* markings. "Inspector?"

Foster switched on the shortwave radio he'd obtained upstairs and twirled the dial. At the proper setting they heard an unmistakable beeping. "The missing box is in that sack!" he announced, amazement written across his face.

"Of course," Rand agreed. "If we believed it was in the compartment when the plane took off from Dublin, that's the only place it could be."

The sack was quickly cut open and Vesper O'Shea knelt to examine the box. "It's the right size, but it's gray!"

"That's contact paper from the roll in Cleaver's box. He simply entered the special cargo compartment when the plane landed here and wrapped the box in this adhesive-backed paper to change its color. He used the orange box in his closet to pre-cut the pieces to exactly the size he needed. Once he'd covered the box he put it in one of those mail

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sacks so it couldn't be examined too closely. I imagine the sack was folded up inside his shirt."

"It was Cleaver all along," Al Russell said. "But how did you know where he'd hidden the box?"

"He used one of those large *Great Britain Post* sacks without thinking. Of course they would be used for mail originating in this country, not mail coming from Ireland. And the sack wasn't even listed on the manifest. In the morning he'd have made it disappear without a trace."

"Then he was just after the money, nothing else?" Vesper asked when she'd managed to get Rand out of earshot of the others.

"Nothing else," Rand agreed. "He knew the regular money shipment was due about this date and he carried the sack and transfer paper with him, just to be ready. When there were two boxes today, it was mere chance that he chose yours rather than the other one."

She was silent for a moment and then said, "I feel so foolish for what I did earlier. Of course you were correct about my relationship with Simon Corcoran. I should never have made it appear otherwise."

"Everything is forgotten."

Inspector Foster approached them with Russell and Fitz trailing behind. "I must thank you for your help, Mr. Rand. You made an impossible case seem quite simple. There's just one thing that bothers me. Why didn't Fitzpatrick here notice Cleaver covering the money chest with transfer paper and then hiding it in the sack?"

"Oh, he did notice," Rand explained. "In fact, I'd venture to say the whole thing was his idea. When Scotland Yard was called in and Vesper brought me on the scene for an independent investigation, Cleaver panicked. After he left the pub so suddenly tonight, Fitz decided he had to be killed before he talked. A made-up game of Russian roulette seemed the easiest explanation."

"What are you talkin' about?" Fitzpatrick growled. "What is all this?"

"But Al came along and you didn't have an opportunity to search for Cleaver's revolver in the dresser drawer. You had to use your own weapon, stepping out of the bathroom to kill him while Al waited in the sitting room out of sight. The inspector mentioned there was an ejected cartridge on the floor by the gun, and that meant it was an automatic pistol. Automatics don't have cylinders you can spin for Russian roulette. Cleaver's gun was the revolver they found later."

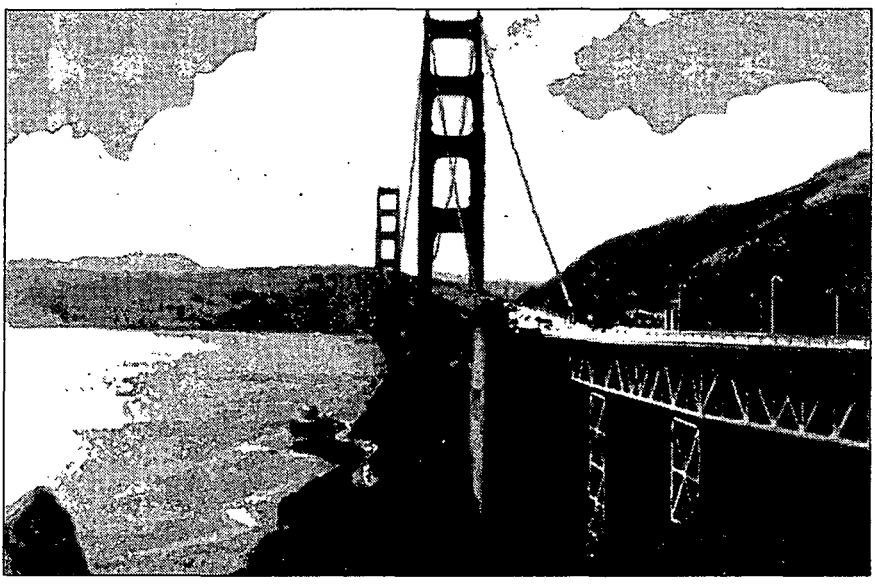
Fitz's hand came out of his pocket holding a switchblade that snapped suddenly open. He made a grab for Vesper, who was nearest to him, perhaps trying for a hostage. He might have gotten her too, but Al Russell intercepted him, grabbed the front of his shirt in both hands, and butted him in the face with his head.

"Damn fool!" he muttered as Fitzpatrick collapsed like a straw man.

"What in hell was that?" Rand asked. It had happened so fast he'd barely seen it.

Russell smiled with a touch of pride. "When I was working the ships we called it a Liverpool kiss." ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



Art by Shirley Chan

WORRIED MOTHER JOB

by Bill Pronzini

It was a worried mother job, the kind you get every now and then when you run a one-man, downscale agency like mine. A son or daughter gets into a hassle that can't or won't be taken to the police, the mother starts to fret, and one morning there she is perched on my client's chair, giving me the sort of look only a mother can work up: sad, anxious, frightened, pleading, and reproving, all at the same time. A look calculated to make a man not only feel sympathetic but conjure up nostalgic images of his own dear old mom; a look calculated to get results.

Her name was Rose Youngblood. She was a widow in her early fifties, lived in Hayward, and sold real estate for a living—not a particularly good living if the real estate she sold was in Hayward. Her problem child was a twenty-seven-year-old son, Brian, who lived alone in a flat here in the city and worked as a freelance computer consultant. "He's brilliant at his work and he makes very good money." He'd never been in any trouble before, she said, never given her a moment's worry until now; now somebody had assaulted him and she was convinced that his life was in jeopardy.

For reasons of his own he refused to tell her who was after him or

©1998 by Bill Pronzini

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

why. She wouldn't have known anything was wrong, she said, if she hadn't come to the city on business last week and gone to his flat for a surprise visit. A friend of her son's, Gary Myers, had answered the door and told her Brian was ill and tried to keep her out. She'd found her son on the couch, naked to the waist, his ribs taped and bruises all over his sides and lower back. "Whoever beat him up must've hit him a dozen times—he couldn't control his bladder for two days afterward." He told her he'd been mugged, but his story didn't jibe with Gary Myers's version when she got Myers alone, and finally she'd prodded Brian into admitting that the beating had been the result of a "personal misunderstanding." That was as much explaining as he was willing to do. He said he'd take care of the problem, there wouldn't be any more violent episodes, but he'd sounded scared—and strange, almost frantic. She knew her son, they'd always been close, and she'd never seen him this shaken or frightened.

Readers who have been following the series of contemporary private-eye stories Bill Pronzini has contributed recently to this magazine have probably noticed that the author never names his shamus. Over the nearly twenty-five years since the series began (with the novel *The Snatch*), the legendary P.I. hero has been referred to simply as the "Nameless Detective." The author's account of this curious fact is that in the 70's neither he nor his editor could think of a suitable name! ¶

By the time I'd heard this much I knew I didn't want anything to do with it. She hadn't consulted Brian before coming to me, she might well have maternally exaggerated both the violence and his state of mind, and in any event an unexplained "personal misunderstanding" is something a private investigator is well advised to stay out of. This sort of job was on a par with wandering into a back alley in a bad neighborhood at midnight: If you had a choice, why would you do it?

So I should've said no then and there. I started to, in fact, but obliquely instead of straight out; she seemed like a nice lady, genuinely proud of her son, seriously concerned for his safety, and I wanted to let her down easy. Big mistake. She showed me The Look, and I squirmed under it and felt some of my resolve slipping, and the next thing I knew we were into an interview-lengthening q & a.

"Well . . . could the trouble be over a woman?" I asked.

She frowned at the question, ran nervous fingers through her tight-curled hair. The hair was dark brown, without a strand of gray—a dye job but a good one. She was an attractive woman, if a little too Suburban Mom for my taste. "I don't see how that's possible," she said.

"You said Brian's not married. Divorced? Separated?"

"Neither. He and a girl named Ginny Lawson were engaged last year, but she broke it off a month before the wedding."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"For what reason?"

"Brian said she got cold feet. The commitment and everything. But it seemed awfully sudden and out of character to me."

"Maybe she found someone else."

"That's possible. I don't know."

"How did Brian handle the breakup?"

"Not very well at first. He really loved that girl."

"Was he angry?"

"Yes. Frankly so was I."

"But he did accept her decision, didn't keep after her to reconsider?"

"Of course he accepted it. Brian isn't the type to cling to unrealistic goals; he's very practical."

"Is he seeing anyone now?"

"Not seriously, no. He isn't ready for another commitment."

"Any one woman he dates more than others?"

"No, I don't think so. He hasn't mentioned anyone."

"Tell me about his activities, what he does for recreation."

"Well, I don't know that he goes out much at all. He spends most of his time at his computers. Not just working—the Internet, playing chess, that sort of thing."

I said gently, "Vices, Mrs. Youngblood?".

"He doesn't have any. Really.".

"Never any problems with liquor or drugs?"

"Absolutely not. I'd know if he was into anything like that."

Sure you would, I thought. "This friend you mentioned, Gary Myers. Are they close?"

"Fairly close, I think. They live near each other. Gary's a decent sort, polite, but a little . . . well, he doesn't have much personality. Nerdy, you know?" She added quickly, "Not at all like Brian."

"What is it they have in common? Computers?"

"Yes. Gary works as an accountant for an electronics firm in Redwood City. Kelleher Electronics."

"Is Brian close to anyone else? Anyone who might have an idea of what led to the beating?"

"Well, there's Paul Janssen. He's from Hayward, too—he and Brian went to school together. They've played computer chess for years."

Except for a few more minor details—Paul Janssen managed a computer store in North Beach, Ginny Lawson lived in Sausalito and was employed at a Wells Fargo branch over there—that was everything she had to tell me. Nothing much in any of it; nothing at all to make me want to change my mind about taking the case. Earnestly and apologetically I said, "I have to be honest with you, Mrs. Youngblood, I really don't see that there's much I can do—"

Before I could get the rest of it out she gave me The Look again, and some verbal firepower to go with it. "Please, won't you at least talk to Brian? Another man, an authority figure . . . he might confide in you. I

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

don't know who else to turn to—he's my only child, his father has been gone ten years. Just talk to him, that's all I ask. Please?"

No, I thought. And looked The Look in the eye and said, "All right, Mrs. Youngblood. I'll do that much, I'll talk to him."

P. T. Barnum would have loved me. Yes, he would.

Brian Youngblood lived on the downhill side of Diamond Heights, across from the Douglass Playground. The address wasn't all that far from my office on O'Farrell, so I took a chance and drove over there unannounced. According to his mother, Brian did most of his work at home and could usually be found there; and it's always easier to gain an audience with a stranger when you're already camped on his doorstep.

The building was a refurbished Stick Victorian that had been sliced into a pair of good-sized flats, one above the other. Brian had the upper, which meant that the view from his windows of the southern curve of the city, the bay, and the East Bay would be pretty impressive. Doing well for himself, all right. You couldn't rent a flat like this, in a neighborhood like this, for less than $2500 a month.

The two entrances were side by side on the high stoop; the one on the right had his name, B. Youngblood, on the mailbox. I leaned on the bell. Pretty soon the intercom clicked and made noises like a hen laying an egg and a staticy voice said, "Yes?"

"Brian Youngblood?"

"What is it?"

I identified myself and said that I was there at the request of his mother and would he give me a few minutes of his time. No answer. Five seconds later the squawk box shut off. Thinking it over, probably. I stood there waiting. It was a windy day, clouds chasing one another across the sky to the east; I pulled my coat collar up against the chill. Out on the bay a freighter from the port of Oakland was moving slowly under the arch of the Bay Bridge, heading toward the Gate. I wished I was on it—not alone; with Kerry, my brand-new wife—instead of standing up on a hill watching it drift on its way toward some exotic port of call. We'd talked about taking a freighter trip someday, Kerry and I, down through the Panama Canal to one or more of the Caribbean islands, before that mode of travel became completely obsolete. Kerry knew somebody who'd taken a cruise like that and it was—

The intercom made chicken noises again. And the staticky voice said, "All right, come on up."

The door buzzed and I opened it and went into a tiny foyer and then up a flight of carpeted stairs. Another door at the top opened as I reached the landing. The young man who stood peering at me through a pair of wire-rimmed glasses was thin, pale, nondescript. His hair was thin and pale too, as fine as cornsilk. His mother had said he wasn't nerdy but he looked that way to me, if not to her. There wasn't much resemblance between them.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I handed him one of my business cards, and his eyes widened when he read what was printed on it. "A detective?" he said. Without benefit of intercom static, his voice was as thin and pale as the rest of him. "You didn't say you were a detective. Why would my mother send a detective to see me?"

"She's concerned about you, the trouble you had last week. She thought I might be able to help."

"I don't think—"

"Brian, for Christ's sake," a woman's voice called sharply from somewhere inside. "Don't talk out there—bring him in here."

He winced slightly; his expression shifted, took on an almost hunted aspect. He wouldn't meet my eyes any longer. "We'd better go in," he said, and turned stiffly and led me into a big, open-front room.

The room's windows would have provided the impressive view I'd speculated on outside if heavy drapes hadn't been drawn across them. It was darkish as a result, palely lit by a desk lamp and a table lamp, and dominated by computer hardware—not just one terminal or work station or whatever they're called, but three of them, plus all sorts of other high-tech paraphernalia that took up one entire wall and part of another. An armchair, a recliner, a two-seat couch, and some chrome-and-glass tables accounted for the rest of the furnishings.

Lounging on her spine in the armchair was a long-haired blonde about Brian's age. She was the tall, lean, slinky type, wearing spike heels and black net stockings and a shiny red dress that ended at mid thigh and was stretched tight across high breasts. The hard-faced type, too: smears of bright crimson lipstick and so much purple-black eyeshadow she might have been made up for one of the zombie roles in *Night of the Living Dead.* I made an effort to conceal my surprise, thinking: Hooker, and not one of the high-priced variety. Either that, or Brian Youngblood has friends a hell of a lot odder than his mother led me to believe.

He said to me, "This is Brandy. She's . . . a friend."

Brandy. Right.

I nodded and said hello, but she didn't return the greeting. I impressed her about as much as a sewer worker would have; she favored me with a brief up-and-down glance, sneered, and transferred her gaze to Brian. "Who is he?" she demanded in one of those affected whiskey contraltos.

He went over and presented her with my card. She sneered at that too. "A 'confidential investigator,'" she said, "of all the damn things. And not even a young, good-looking one. What's the matter with that mother of yours, Brian?"

He still wore the hunted look, shaded now with embarrassment. "Brandy, please . . ."

"The old bitch. You told her you'd handle it, didn't you? You told her it wasn't anything serious."

"Yes, I told her."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Damn meddling old bitch."

Some piece of work, this one. I paid her the same discourtesy she'd paid me by ignoring her. I said to Brian, "Handle what, Mr. Youngblood? Just what kind of trouble are you in?"

"You don't have to tell him anything, Brian. Not a thing."

"I asked you," I said to Youngblood, "not your friend. If you'll talk to me, there might be something I can do."

He shook his head. He wouldn't look at me; his gaze was fixed on Brandy.

"Do?" the blonde said nastily. "What can a fat old guy *do* for anyone?"

"Your mother cares about you, Mr. Youngblood. That ought to count for something."

"She—she shouldn't have gone behind my back," he said. "I don't need a detective. I don't need anyone's help."

"Except mine," Brandy said. "Tell him to leave us alone, Brian. Tell him to go apply for Social Security. Tell him to join Jenny Craig and lose some of his lard."

I'd had just about enough cheap Brandy. I turned slowly, treated her to the same kind of up-and-down glance she'd given me, sneered the same way, and said, "You're part of the trouble, sweetmeat."

"What?"

"You heard me. Any so-called friend with a mouth like yours is part of anyone's trouble."

The bloody lips peeled back away from her teeth. She started to lift herself out of the chair, changed her mind, and sank back with her mouth twisted and hate leaking out of her eyes. I laughed at her before I turned to Youngblood again.

"Is she the reason you got beat up?"

"Brandy? No. No, she . . . it had nothing to do with her."

"What did it have to do with?"

Headshake.

"Come on, Mr. Youngblood. For your mother's sake, if not for your own."

He was still staring at the blonde. "Brandy . . . ?"

"No!" she yelled. "To hell with her. You say one word to fatso here and you'll regret it. I mean that, Brian. You'll regret it."

Youngblood laid his eyes on me again. Now he looked scared as well as hunted and embarrassed. "You'd better leave," he said.

"Is that what you want? You, not her."

"Yes. Leave. Just leave and don't come back."

The blonde, behind me: "And tell Mommie Dearest to mind her own business from now on."

There wasn't anything I could do except put a tight lid on my anger and walk out of there. Shutting my ears on the way downstairs to another stream of poisonous Brandy.

I went over to the playground and took a turn through it, to cool down before I did any more driving. The anger I felt was directed as

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

much at myself as at Brian Youngblood and his dragon lady. This was what I got for taking on a worried mother job. Well, I'd done as much for Rose Youngblood as I could. Now I was out of it; now I could go back to tracing skips and ferreting out insurance frauds and doing all the other routine and reasonable tasks that come to a man in my profession.

Sure. Except that I couldn't get the scene the three of us had just played out of my mind. In retrospect it had a vaguely surreal, vaguely ludicrous quality, and yet its hard and nasty edge hinted at all sorts of hidden tensions, hidden meanings.

Brandy had some kind of hold on Youngblood—that seemed clear. But what kind? Sex? Probably, but I had a feeling there was more to it than that. She seemed to hate his mother without even knowing her personally: If Rose Youngblood was aware of Brandy she'd have given me an earful about her. So why the animosity on the blonde's part? And why the tacit acceptance of that animosity on Brian's? And what was Brandy's connection to the beating he'd taken?

Nagging questions, puzzling questions—the kind that would keep on bothering me unless I did some digging for the answers.

So all right, I *wasn't* out of it yet. Not just yet.

I drove back to O'Farrell Street. I would've preferred an immediate talk with Gary Myers and/or Paul Janssen, but such would have to wait until later, when both men returned home from their jobs. Workplace discussions of personal problems are usually a bad idea; if people are going to be candid with a detective, they're much more likely to do so in the privacy of their own homes.

Meanwhile, a background check on Brian Youngblood seemed like a good idea. Even if it didn't shed any light on his trouble, it might give me a better handle on the sort of person he was. Tomorrow morning my new part-time assistant, Tamara Corbin, could use her Apple PowerBook to access the California Justice Information System's computers and find out if Youngblood had a criminal record or outstanding warrants of any type. As for a standard credit check . . .

I stopped in at Bay City Realtors, on my building's ground floor, to talk to Martin Quon. A few years ago a new state law had gone into effect prohibiting detectives and other private citizens from using credit services like TRW for investigative purposes. This made my job more difficult and invited a certain amount of ethical compromise. One way to get around the new law was to have a realtor request the credit pull, since realtors are in the buying and selling business and therefore allowed to subscribe to credit-monitoring services. Martin Quon didn't much like being part of a private cop's quasi-legal corner-cutting, but in consideration of reciprocal favors and the fact that we'd known each other for a lot of years, he was inclined to go along with it. I asked him to pull Brian Youngblood's credit history. He said he would, but not until he'd indulged in his usual series of face-saving grumbles.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Half an hour later I had the report on my desk. And it added yet another batch of puzzling questions. According to Rose Youngblood, her son was at the top of his profession and made piles of money. According to the report, Brian Youngblood had spent most of the past thirteen months mired in debt. Credit cards maxed to the limit, with not even the minimum being paid. Two and three months in arrears on his rent. PG&E and telephone bills unpaid and service shut off once by Pac Bell. All of this had built up over a ten-month period, until three months ago, when he'd come into enough money—nearly ten thousand dollars—to pay off what he owed in back rent and utilities and to lower his credit card balances enough so that he was permitted to keep the cards. But the credit fix had been only temporary. In the ninety days since, he'd managed to thrust himself right back into a money trap: credit cards near maxed out, rent and utility bills unpaid. If he didn't do something about it soon, he was facing eviction and bankruptcy.

So where did all his earnings go? Brandy? She was the golddigger type, all right. Thirteen months ago . . . was that when he'd taken up with her? Before then he'd had a fairly stable credit rating, so the overextension was a new pattern. I wondered, too, if Brandy and/or Brian's financial problems had had anything to do with Ginny Lawson walking out of his life.

Brandy . . . Brandy what? Well, maybe Myers or Janssen could provide her last name. And some idea of just who and what she was.

I stayed late at the office, closed up at six o'clock, and then drove down to Gary Myers's apartment building in Noe Valley. He wasn't home. I considered leaving my card in his mailbox, decided against it. Better to wait and catch him in person, without advance notice.

With Paul Janssen I had better luck. He lived in an old brown-shingled building on Funston, across from the narrow panhandle strip on Park Presidio Boulevard, and he was home alone and inclined to be cooperative when I showed him the photostat of my investigator's license and explained why I was there.

"So Brian's in trouble," he said.

"His mother thinks so. So do I."

"Well, I can't say I'm surprised." Janssen sighed and rumpled his thatch of lank red hair. "I don't know that I can tell you much—I haven't seen or talked to him in months. But whatever I can do . . ."

When we were inside and seated in his cluttered living room I said, "Mrs. Youngblood led me to believe you and Brian were good friends, played computer chess together regularly."

"All in the past. That's the way he wanted it."

"Why?"

"Wish I knew. You know somebody most of your life, you think you know them pretty well, right? And then all of a sudden something happens and they weird out and you realize you didn't really know them at all."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"When did Brian start to weird out?"

"Over a year ago."

"In what ways?"

"Well, it started with buying things—expensive computer hardware that he didn't really need. State-of-the-art stuff. The last time I saw him he had six PCs and five printers. His spare bedroom looked like a Compaq warehouse."

"How did he explain it to you?"

"He didn't even try," Janssen said. "Just said he wanted the stuff so he bought it."

I asked, "How else did he change?"

"Grew distant, withdrawn. Started holing up in his flat. I'd try to get him to log on for chess but he wasn't interested. I'd call him up and get his machine and he wouldn't call back."

"Did you know he was in debt, not paying his bills?"

"Yeah, I heard. I can tell you part of the reason: He lost two of his consulting jobs."

"Oh? How come?"

"He wasn't doing his work. Just didn't seem to care anymore."

"Why?"

"Not a clue."

"When was it that he lost the jobs?"

"About four months ago."

"Is he the one who told you?"

"No. I found out from Gary Myers."

"You know Myers, then."

"Not well. Brian introduced us, but we didn't hit it off. I ran into him at a computer trade show at the Cow Palace and we got to talking. He was concerned about Brian too. But neither of us could figure out what to do about it."

"You consider contacting Brian's mother?"

"We discussed it, yeah. Myers said he'd told Brian he was thinking of doing that and Brian threw a fit, told him to mind his own business. He and his mom are close, real protective of each other—I guess she told you that. I probably should've gone ahead and got in touch with her anyway. But I didn't want to make things worse by butting in."

The old code of noninvolvement. Not that I blamed Janssen much; a situation like this is always ticklish for the parties involved, both directly and indirectly.

He said, "I guess Mrs. Youngblood finally found out some other way. But why'd she go to a detective? I mean, there's nothing you can do about weird behavior or financial problems, is there?"

"No, but that's not why she hired me. She doesn't know about any of that. All she knows is that somebody beat him up last week."

"Beat him up? Brian?" Janssen looked and sounded amazed. "Who?"

"We don't know yet."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Man, that doesn't make sense. Brian's totally nonviolent. If you'd met him . . ."

"I did meet him. This afternoon, at his flat. His girlfriend Brandy was there too."

"Brandy?"

"You don't know her?"

"No. I never met anyone named Brandy."

I described her and her foul mouth, provided a capsule summary of the scene at Youngblood's flat.

"That doesn't make sense either," Janssen said. "I can't imagine Brian letting *anybody* talk that way about his mom. He didn't stand up to her at all?"

"Not for a second."

"Man." He wagged his head. "I never knew Brian to be attracted to a woman like that."

"Not his type?"

"No way. His mom tell you he was engaged to Ginny Lawson?"

"Yes."

"You haven't talked to Ginny yet, right? When you do you'll see she's the total opposite of this Brandy. Ginny's about as conservative as they come."

"Why'd she break off the engagement, do you know?"

"He wouldn't say, but I figured it had to be the weird way he was acting."

"So it wasn't the breakup that caused his erratic behavior?"

"No. The weird stuff started a couple of months before."

"And for no apparent reason that you could see."

"None."

I told him about Brian paying off most of his debts three months ago, only to backslide again since. "Where could he have gotten the ten thousand dollars? Certificate of deposit or IRAs, maybe?"

"Uh-uh, not Brian. He's never been much on future planning. He and Ginny used to argue about that all the time."

"Loan from a friend? Myers, for instance?"

"Not Myers—he doesn't have that kind of money. And if Brian has any other friends with that much cash lying around, I don't know who they are. Maybe he got it from a bank or finance company?"

"He didn't." It would have been on the credit report if he had. "New consulting work?"

"That's out too. Even if he hustled two or three new jobs, it'd've taken him a lot longer than a month to raise that much cash."

Which left what? A couple of possibilities, one of them—

"Brandy," Janssen said, as if reading my mind. "Could *she* have loaned it to him?"

I shrugged. "No way of telling until I find out more about her."

"It'd explain why he let her talk about his mom that way, wouldn't it? Why he let her walk all over him?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Partly, anyway."

Janssen wagged his head again. "Weird, man—totally weird. How does a guy like Brian, a good guy, let himself get so screwed up?"

Rhetorical question. Most of us can't even explain to ourselves why we screw up or get screwed up in all the ways we do.

Things got even weirder at eleven the next morning.

I was at my desk, going over the CJIS printout Tamara Corbin had just handed me—Brian Youngblood had no criminal record, and not so much as an outstanding parking violation—when the telephone rang. A half-muffled voice said rapidly in my ear, "If you want to know who hurt Brian Youngblood and why, ask a man named Kinsella. Nick Kinsella, Blacklight Tavern." That was all. Click, and the line went dead.

My mouth was doing a flytrap imitation; I shut it as I cradled the receiver. He'd tried to disguise his voice with a handkerchief or the like, but he hadn't done much of a job of it. Enough of the thin, pale tone had come through to make it recognizable.

Brian Youngblood. And why in hell would Brian Youngblood want to tell me something anonymously that he could have volunteered straight out, over the phone or over a cup of coffee?

I knew Nick Kinsella. And I knew the Blacklight Tavern. Both operated on San Bruno Avenue, off Bayshore Boulevard west of Candlestick. Kinsella owned the bar, but it wasn't his primary source of income. He'd made his pile in the fine old time-honored trade of loansharking. He was rough trade, too; you had to be pretty desperate or pretty naive to go to him for money. He charged a heavy weekly vig, and if you missed a payment or two you could expect a visit from one of his enforcers. If Brian Youngblood was into Nick Kinsella for ten thousand plus, he'd been lucky to get off with nothing more than bruised ribs and bruised kidneys. Miss another payment and he'd find out the hard way just how brittle his bones were.

I picked up the car and drove south on the Bayshore Freeway to the San Bruno Avenue exit. This was one of the city's older residential neighborhoods, working class, like the one I'd grown up in in the Outer Mission. During World War II, and while the Hunters Point Naval Shipyard humped along for twenty-five years afterward, it had been a reasonably decent section to live and raise a family in. But then the shipyard shut down, and mostly black Hunters Point began to deteriorate into a mean-streets ghetto. Now, with the crack-infested Point on one side and the drug deli that McLaren Park had become on the other, the neighborhood had suffered an inevitable erosion. Signs of decay were everywhere: boarded-up storefronts, bars on windows and doors, houses defaced by graffiti and neglect, homeless people and drunks huddled or sprawled in doorways.

The Blacklight fit right in; from a distance it looked like something that had been badly scorched in a fire. Black-painted facade, smoke-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tinted windows, black sign with neon letters that would blaze white after dark but looked burned-out in the daylight. I parked in front and locked the doors, not that that would stop anybody who thought the car contained something tradeable for a rock of crack or a jug of cheap sweet wine.

Inside, the place might have been any bottom-end bar populated by the usual array of daytime drinkers. A couple of the men and one of the women gave me bleary-eyed once-overs, decided I wasn't anybody worth knowing, hustling, or hassling, and turned their attention back to the focal point of their lives. The bartender had a head like a redwood burl and a surly manner. All he said when I bellied up was, "Yeah?"

"Nick Kinsella. He in?"

"Who wants to know?"

I passed over one of my cards. He didn't even look at it.

"Mr. Kinsella know you?"

"He knows me. Tell him it's a business matter."

He took the card to a backbar phone, did a little talking and a little listening, and came back without the card. "Okay," he said in less surly tones. "Over there. First door past the ladies' john."

I found the door and knocked on it and walked in. Mostly barren office that stank of cigar smoke and had two men in it—Kinsella, and a lopsided, balding guy with the build of a wrestler who was no doubt one of the shark's enforcers. Kinsella sat bulging behind a cherrywood desk. He'd grown a third chin since I'd last seen him, added another couple of inches to his waistline. That last meeting had been five years ago, after I'd tracked down and brought back a bail-jumper for a bondsman named Abe Melikian. The jumper was somebody Kinsella had a grudge against. He liked me for ushering the guy back into the slammer.

I shut the door behind me. "Long time, Nick."

"Long time," he agreed. "So what brings you around? Don't tell me you got money troubles?"

"Not your kind. But I might know somebody who does."

"Yeah? Who'd that be?"

"Young guy, works in computers—Brian Youngblood."

His face showed me nothing. He leaned back in his chair, clasped sausage fingers behind his neck. "Maybe I know him, maybe I don't. How come you're interested?"

"He's in over his head. I'm trying to find out how deep."

"Working for him?"

I hesitated before I said, "No, his mother."

Kinsella's lips twitched. Don't laugh, you bastard. He didn't; he sat forward again. "I don't like to talk about my customers. Bad for business."

"Only if word gets out. I'm a businessman too, Nick. I know how to keep my mouth shut."

"Just a couple of businessmen schmoozing, huh?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"That's right."

"No hassles?"

"Not from me."

"Okay. So what you want to know?"

"How much Youngblood borrowed initially, how much he's into you for now. And whether something can be worked out in the way of accident insurance."

"He already have an accident, did he?"

"Just last week. Laid him up for a couple of days."

"That's too bad," Kinsella said. "But you got to expect something like that when you don't pay attention."

The fat shark was enjoying himself, playing this little game. Maybe someday I'd have a chance to play a different kind of game with him; it was a good thought and I held onto it. "The original nut, Nick," I said. "How much?"

"Ten thousand."

"Pretty hefty amount. What'd he use for collateral?"

"Personal property. I took a look, I was satisfied."

All the computer hardware, probably. I asked, "What does he owe you now, with the vig? Thirteen, fourteen?"

"Five."

"Wait a minute—five thousand? How'd it get cut that low?"

Kinsella's smile widened. "Your boy walked in here two days ago and laid eighty-five hundred on me. Cash. He's a good boy, your boy. Teach him a lesson, he learns real quick. He don't need no accident insurance, not anymore."

"Where'd he get the eighty-five hundred?"

"Who knows? He don't say, I don't ask."

Not from another shark, I thought, not with the size of the original nut and the fact that Kinsella had had to send out an enforcer. Loan sharks are like their salt-water relatives: When one spills some bad blood the rest smell it and keep their distance.

"What about the five thousand balance?" I asked.

"What about it?"

"If his source is dry he'll start missing payments again. Then he will need that insurance."

"Not if he shows up next week with the full five K plus interest."

"He told you he was going to do that?"

"Guaranteed it." Kinsella laughed. "Swore it, in fact. You want to know what he swore it on?"

"No."

He told me anyway. "His mother. Your boy swore it on his love for his sweet old mama."

Gary Myers wasn't at Kelleher Electronics. Twenty miles down to Redwood City, telling myself that the time had come for a workplace discussion, telling myself that if anybody had an idea where Brian

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Youngblood had got the eighty-five hundred to pay off Kinsella, it was Myers—and "I'm sorry, sir, Mr. Myers is out of the office today."

Grumbling, I got back into the car and headed north.

Myers wasn't home, either.

And didn't that just figure?

Sausalito, across the Golden Gate Bridge on the northwestern rim of the bay, has been a lot of things over the years: fishing village, artists' colony, a San Francisco bedroom community, real-estate agent's wet dream (its wooded hills are dotted with million-dollar and near million-dollar homes), and expensive tourist trap. I used to go over there fairly often in the pre-trap days; now, not much at all. It's still a pretty little town, it still has some good restaurants, but I never did enjoy vying for street space with poorly driven rental cars and sidewalk space with camera-laden gawkers from Houston, Peoria, and Tokyo.

The Wells Fargo branch where Ginny Lawson worked was on Bridgeway, on the north end of town. She was on the job today, at least. A bank officer, she occupied one of half a dozen desks on a carpeted area opposite the tellers' cages. The nameplate on the desk said *Ms. Virginia Lawson.* Nobody was sitting in the customer chairs in front of it, so I went straight on over.

She glanced up from a computer screen as I approached, showed me a prim professional smile as I sat down. Conservative, Paul Janssen had called her, and she looked it: gray skirt and jacket, white blouse, minimum amount of makeup, brown hair drawn up into a tight bun. Her gray eyes had a remote quality, as if they were looking at you through a self-imposed filter.

"May I help you?"

"I hope so." I laid my card in front of her. "But I'm not here on bank business. It's a personal matter."

"Yes?" She glanced at the card, frowned, and said the word again with a flatter inflection. "Yes?"

"It's about Brian Youngblood."

She froze. Almost literally: All of her flesh seemed to harden before my eyes, like water turning to ice in one of those time-lapse photographic sequences. In a strained voice she said, "I have nothing to say to anyone about Brian Youngblood."

"It's important, Ms. Lawson. I'm afraid he's in serious trouble."

Silence for at least fifteen seconds. It occurred to me that she intended to keep on sitting there like that, frozen and silent, for as long as it took me to leave her alone. But then, as I leaned forward to make another plea, she said abruptly, "I'm not surprised."

"That Brian is in trouble?"

"He's sick. He has been for a long time."

"Sick in what way?"

"Mentally. He's mentally ill."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Would you elaborate on that?"

Tight little headshake.

"Is that the reason you wouldn't marry him?" I asked. "Because you think he's mentally ill?"

"I won't discuss my private life."

"Ms. Lawson, please. If you know something—"

"I said I won't discuss it."

"I can understand it must be painful for you. But if you'll let me tell you just how serious—"

"No. I don't want to hear it."

All right, I thought, one more shot. "Brandy," I said.

She jerked as if I'd slapped her. The tight little headshake again, then the frozen silence.

"You know her. Tell me about her."

Nothing.

"She's the root of Brian's troubles, isn't she?"

Nothing.

"The reason for his sickness? The reason you ended your relationship with him?"

Still nothing. But the ice was beginning to crack. She sat just as rigidly, but muscles had begun to twitch in her face—an effect like fissures forming and spreading.

"Ms. Lawson?"

She started to laugh. A low, bitter, humorless sound that settled a coldness on my neck. The facial muscles kept on twitching, as if they were acting as a pump for the dribbling laughter.

"Brandy," she said. "Oh God, Brandy."

"Ms. Lawson?"

"Sick," she said, "sick, sick," and went right on laughing.

It was as if she were alone somewhere, all alone in a place I couldn't get to and wouldn't want to be if I could. I got up and went away from her, away from the empty, bitter sounds of her pain.

As I drove back across the Golden Gate Bridge I used the car phone to call information for Gary Myers's home number. It was after four by then; he had to come home sometime. But I didn't want to go chasing over to Noe Valley again on the chance, and to hell with worrying about advance warning. I was going to talk to him sooner or later, whether he liked it or not.

I punched out his number while I was waiting in line at the toll booths. Three rings—answering machine. "This is Gary Myers. I'm not available right now, but if you'll leave your name and number at the tone I'll call you back as soon as I can."

I sat there holding the receiver. Somebody behind me beeped his horn, did it again, and then laid on the thing until I realized I was holding up traffic.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Under my breath I said, "Sweet Christ," because I'd also just realized the truth about Brian Youngblood.

The front door to his Douglass Street flat stood wide open. That didn't have to mean much of anything—doors get left open for all sorts of reasons, even in security-conscious neighborhoods like this one—but it made me even edgier than I already was. I hurried up onto the stoop, poked my head inside. The door at the top of the stairs was shut. No sounds came from up there. I pulled back out and thumbed the bell button above the mailbox.

The intercom stayed quiet. So did the door buzzer.

I hesitated. Open door, open invitation—right? I went all the way in and slowly up the stairs to the landing. If this door was locked . . . but it wasn't. The knob turned under my hand. I pushed it inward until I had an angled view into the center hallway and part of the kitchen. No one in sight. No one talking or moving around.

"Hello? Anybody home?"

Silence.

I called Youngblood's name, called it again and added my own. Thin echoes faded into a stillness that seemed heavier now, as if I had somehow thickened it with my presence. I walked soft and wary into the hallway, around to where I could see into the front room. Empty. The window drapes were closed, as they had been on my previous visit; in the half-light the row of computer screens glowed, three square greenish faces that seemed to pulse faintly as if with an inner life of their own.

The way the flat was laid out, there figured to be a bedroom at the front and another at the rear beyond the kitchen. The one in front, adjacent to the living room, would be the larger of the two; check that one first. I crossed to a closed door in the inner wall, prodded it open. Drawn drapes in there, too, but a lamp burned on a table beside the bed—

Ah, no.

He—they—lay in a backward sprawl across the bed, a small hole such as a .22 makes leaking dribbles of coagulating blood above the left eye. Brian. And Brandy. One body, but for months now it had contained two individuals—the quiet hacker and the foul-mouthed blond bimbo. Half him and half her, even now in death: black net stockings and an ice-blue silk dress that had twisted open in front to reveal one of the foam-rubber falsies underneath; lean, ascetic face without makeup, nothing concealing the black hair cropped close to the skull. The blond wig was on the floor next to the bed. Shot while in the midst of one of his transformations from Brian into Brandy or Brandy into Brian.

I went in long enough to press two fingers against the artery in his neck, even though there was no point in it. He'd been dead at least half an hour. From next to the bed I could see inside an open walk-in closet. Racks of women's clothing, four or five times as many garments as

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

there were of men's wear, two expensive fur wraps and a sable coat among them. No surprise there. Brandy had been the dominant personality for some time.

I backed up, turned out of the bedroom into the living room. And drew up sharp, with my stomach kicking and a crawling sensation across my scalp.

He was standing in the hallway fifteen feet away, the pistol in his hand a .22 Colt Woodsman. He'd been in the flat all along, hiding somewhere in back when he heard me come in. Thin, pale, nondescript, peering at me through a pair of wire-rimmed glasses. The elusive Gary Myers.

"Stay where you are," he said in his thin, pale voice. "Don't come near me."

"All right, Gary."

"So you know. Everything, I guess."

"Most of it, not all. Why don't you put the gun down and we'll talk about it."

"No. You stay there."

I watched the piece; it was loose and jumpy in his fingers. I didn't like that and I didn't like the look of him. Face the color of bacon fat, sweat coating it in beads and runnels. Eyes like peeled grapes in curdled milk. On the ragged edge and teetering.

"I killed her," he said. "Brandy. I shot her."

"Why?"

"I couldn't take it anymore. She kept hurting me. All my life people have been hurting me but nobody as badly as her."

"How did she hurt you?"

"Made me do things."

"What things? Not sexual—"

"No! Brian wasn't gay and neither am I. And Brandy . . . she didn't want anything but control. Mean, evil control freak. She deserved to die."

"What did she make you do, Gary?"

He shook his head and then moved sideways a couple of paces, leaned his left shoulder against the wall as if he needed the support to remain standing. The movements were stiff, as his movements had been yesterday—a natural stiffness, not what I'd taken to be the result of a beating. Brian as Brandy, in the chair the whole time, starting to lift out of it when I stoked her rage, sinking back with a grimace not of hate but of pain from bruised ribs and kidneys—

"She made my life a living hell the past three months," Myers said. "I didn't know Brian was a transvestite until then. He kept it a secret from everyone, until Brandy began to take over. She'd been with him for years, he said, getting stronger and stronger. She made him buy her expensive presents, clothes and jewelry and computers . . . made him spend more and more time with her. She didn't want him to marry

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Ginny, she was jealous of Ginny, so she told Ginny all about Brian and her."

"And three months ago she told you."

"She had to. I was Brian's friend, I wanted to help him, but he couldn't make me do what she wanted. Neither could she, not then. But I was afraid of her from the first. Terrified. Always putting me down, calling me names, threatening me . . . I hated her too. You heard her yesterday, the way she talked to me, the things she said about Brian's mother. She was jealous of her too."

I didn't say anything, still watching the .22.

"It was her idea for me to pretend to be Brian yesterday. She thought it was funny. She wanted to see if she could fool you. And she did, didn't she?"

"Yeah," I said, "she fooled me."

"Evil. She *deserved* to die."

"You still haven't told me what she made you do, Gary. Give her money so Brian could pay off Nick Kinsella?"

"Yes."

"Your money?"

"I don't have any money. My company's . . . she made me steal it, embezzle it. She said it was the only way to save Brian. She said if I'd stolen it three months ago, when she wanted me to, he wouldn't have had to go to a loan shark. Her fault, but she twisted it around so I was to blame. She hounded me and hounded me until I did it . . . three days ago."

"What happened today?"

"She wanted me to steal more money. Another five thousand to pay off the rest of what Brian owed. I couldn't. . . . I couldn't do it again. That's why I called you this morning . . . I thought if you knew about Kinsella—I wasn't thinking clearly, not then and not later. I let it slip that I'd called you. She went crazy . . . hit me, kicked me, threatened to kill me. . . . I couldn't stand it anymore. I went home and got my pistol and came back—I almost didn't use it because she was changing back into Brian. But she was still in control, she laughed at me, dared me. . . ."

"Gary, listen—"

But he was beyond listening. He made a liquidy sobbing sound. "I killed her and I'm not sorry. But Brian—he was my best friend and I killed him too. I can't live with that. I'm a coward, a miserable damned coward. . . ."

And in the next second he did what he must've been nerving himself to do the past half-hour: He proved just how much of a coward he was. Before I could even think about trying to stop him, he yanked the Woodsman's muzzle up against his temple and fired.

I turned away, stood for fifteen or twenty seconds with the sound of the shot like a frozen echo in my ears and my hands fisted so tightly I could feel the nails gouging skin from my palms. When the tension in me finally began to ease a little I went over and squatted next to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Myers's crumpled body. Dead—what the hell else? All three of them now.

I listened. Quiet in the flat below; nobody home down there, probably. At one of the front windows I peered through a slit in the drapes. The street below was quiet too. The .22 hadn't made much of a bang, this time or when Myers had fired his earlier fatal shot. For the moment, the only person who knew what had happened here was me.

Back in the bedroom I stood for a little time looking down at what was left of Brian Youngblood. I could almost see the headline in tomorrow's *Chronicle:* BIZARRE TRANSVESTITE MURDER-SUICIDE. Oh yeah, the media would love this. Even in jaded San Francisco, where bizarre happenings are part of the norm, it was just kinky enough to get a certain amount of play—the kind that provokes smarmy comments and sick jokes.

He's my only child. . . . I don't have anyone else. . . .

It'll tear her up, I thought. She'll never get over it. His death, even the money troubles and the collusion in Myers's embezzlement—that she can learn to live with. But the rest of it . . .

I kept staring at the body lying there in the ice-blue dress and the black net stockings. No lipstick or eyeshadow—he'd scrubbed that off. Just the dress and stockings and whatever feminine underwear he had on. Blood on the dress? No—just on his forehead and the one eye. Blood on the wig? I bent to look at it. No—he'd either had it in his hand when Myers shot him or it had gotten knocked off the bed when he fell. All those clothes in the closet, bottles of makeup on the dresser . . . but he could've been living with a woman, it could look that way in the preliminary stages. Only two people knew different, Ginny Lawson and me, and she wasn't talking to anyone about Brandy. Sure, it might come out later that he'd been a cross-dresser, but it wouldn't have any media appeal by then. It was what he was wearing when he died, and the dual-personality angle, that made it sleazy media fodder. With men's clothing on instead of the dress and feminine undergarments, with some of the details left out or glossed over . . .

What's the matter with you? Cardinal rule, for God's sake: Never under any circumstances tamper with evidence in a homicide case. You could lose your license, you could go to jail. Call the cops now!

But if I was careful, there wasn't much risk. Not with my long-standing reputation as a cooperative straight arrow. And did it make any real difference to the law, to justice, if the details were altered slightly? No. Would it make a difference to a bereaved mother and her memories of her only son? Definitely. All the difference.

Bleeding heart, prize sucker . . . yeah. It had been that kind of case from the beginning, hadn't it?

Quickly, before I could change my mind, I began tampering with the damn evidence. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

BLOODBUDGIES AND CARNIVORES

by Sandra Meyer

"I'm dying," Arthur Nothnagel said to his wife. She bowed her head, twisting the cluster of diamonds on the wedding finger of her left hand. When she looked up he saw her eyes were wet. It had actually been a question, but now he knew.

"I'll be clearing out my desk today."

It was part of a brave ongoing joke but she couldn't manage a smile this time. She left the room hurriedly.

"The cancer cells have been buying up shares in my body on the q.t.," he had told his business cronies who visited him in the hospital. "Now they've come out into the open and they're making a takeover bid."

"Sock it to those sons, Art," they growled, and his accountant Richard had gone so far as to punch the air with his balled-up fist.

"For sure," Arthur grinned. "They want to retrench me from Life Inc. and give me the leaden handshake. They won't get it right."

But they did.

Despite the fact that he had fought back furiously with all the strength of a body that had once been a powerful forward in his varsity rugby team and was still as fit as his gymnasium workouts could make it.

When they heard that Arthur had been sent home from the hospital, shocked business acquaintances murmured to each other in bars over liquid lunches, "And he's so young. Only fifty-three." Unspoken was the

Two previous stories by Sandra Meyer appeared in *EQMM* under the pseudonym Frances Joyce ("The Wheel," Mid-December '94; "Ach, Die Seeman Ist Perdue," March '97). Like the following tale, the earlier pieces were set in Ms. Meyer's native South Africa. However, this time the author evokes the wild spaces of her homeland rather than its urban settings. Readers will find here, too, a very subtle depiction of the anatomy of a murder... ¶

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

comparison with the ominous number of their own years.

"The business he's built up . . ."

"The properties he owns . . ."

"The farm . . ."

"The mansion in Joburg . . ."

"The new house in Capetown . . ."

"The investments . . ."

"D'you remember what he said about that painting he bought at Ashby's? 'I appreciate art when art appreciates.'"

Laughter.

"But listen, you know what he chaffed me? 'What do I know about Impressionism? *Monet* sounds like *money,* that's good enough for me.'"

More laughter.

"Time for another round?"

Arthur, dying, lay in bed in his new house listening to the Southeaster keening over Bantry Bay. It ripped the hibiscus heads off the bushes and flung them over its shoulder. It shattered the clear glass of the swimming pool into a frosted crazing. It dyed the Atlantic indigo blue and spattered it with whitecaps.

"The wind is blowing my life away," he thought. His head felt as light and whirling as an empty grocery carrier bag cartwheeling down the street.

He regretted that when he died he would be leaving so much of value. His eyes dwelt with satisfaction on the marble floor of his bedroom, the Bohemian cut-glass chandelier, the Venetian mirror, the chinoiserie wardrobe. He thought of the other rooms, the luxurious guest rooms, the magnificent reception room, the bathroom with the gold-plated taps and the Jacuzzi, the wine cellar, the small private cinema auditorium with the seats upholstered in red velvet. All as opulent as an interior designer with a blank cheque could make it.

"It cost an arm and a leg," he thought, "but that bandit knew his stuff." The house had been photographed and written up as a feature in one of the national magazines.

His ten-year-old son slid open the patio door and stepped inside the bedroom.

"How you feeling, Dad?"

"So-so, my boy."

"I'm fixing the lawnmower engine, Dad."

"You're the best mechanic ever, son."

Under his shock of sun-bleached blond hair the boy flushed faintly with pleasure, but said nothing.

"Isn't it windy out there, Charl?"

"Not so bad. It's mostly sheltered. Just call me if you need me, Dad."

Arthur watched the boy close the patio door again. His son meant more than anything in the world to him. He had read somewhere some writer had said that the purpose of life was to have children. He understood what that meant. He felt his own life, whatever he had done with

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

it, was somehow justified in his son. The child had been premature and for a while he had been worried. But Charl had grown into a healthy, sturdy boy. He was handsome, taking after his mother. But Arthur felt his son resembled him in a more essential way. The child was deep and could keep his own counsel; he was a chip off the old block. He had inherited some of his dad's talents, too. He was already a good shot, for instance. Only sometimes it worried him that Charl seemed too practical-minded and not interested enough in business.

"For heaven's sake," Jennifer had exclaimed when he pointed this out to her. "He's still a child." And of course she was right.

He might have drifted into unconsciousness for a while. Later he became aware of his wife standing again at the bedside, a metal kidney bowl in one beautifully manicured hand.

"Are you in pain? Would you like an injection?" she murmured.

He shook his head. He felt as if he had drifted beyond pain and suspected that it was not a good sign.

"Sit with me."

She drew up a Louis XVI chair and subsided into it gracefully. Her cool palms enclosed one of his hands.

He looked at his beautiful wife with the admiration of an investor whose purchase of an obscure stock has proved brilliantly profitable. No one could have suspected that illness and the sick room upset her. She had overcome her instinctive feelings and had been a selfless and tireless nurse all through these last weeks. She had done this because she was devoted to him.

It was that gift she had for self-transformation, for transcendence of her own instincts, of her own origins, a tactful and superior opportunism that he had seen and admired in her when first they met.

There she sat in her Paris designer dress, her golden hair elegantly coiffured on the top of her head by the hairdresser, her body discreetly calling attention to the pampering and cultivation it had enjoyed. Who could discover in this superbly finished woman the barefoot, sun-bleached, T-shirt and shorts child of an unsuccessful general dealer in a small Transvaal town? The girl had grown into a young woman and the bare feet had been fitted into cheap plastic high heels. Then she had won the town's beauty contest and run away to the Big City.

"We've been married now, how long?"

"Nearly eleven years," she said promptly.

"And never a day regretted," he told her.

She tightened her hold on his hand.

If she had a shortcoming, he thought, it was that she was not a very passionate woman. Cold, even. But he told himself that that was the reverse side of a rational temperament. On the positive side she was very intelligent and discreet. Since their marriage he had never had to suffer a moment's uneasiness on her behalf. Her loyalty was complete.

"Remember our last trip to London?" He had had to fly over on business and she had accompanied him.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Dinner and a first-night show," she glowed at him. "Your gift, which you shouldn't have." She smoothed her dress so he could see she was wearing the jewel brooch. "That wonderful afternoon at Hampton Court."

"You work hard." He smiled. "You're hostess . . . wife . . . mother. You deserve your holidays overseas. Though sometimes I think you enjoy a few quiet days at the farm even more."

"I only wish you'd been able to come with me to the farm more often," she replied earnestly.

"Business . . ." He turned his head aside impatiently on the pillow. That had been a familiar plaint of hers.

"On the farm, it's another world," she said slowly, as if talking to herself. "The cock crowing at dawn makes me feel glad to be alive. And once there was a baby impala Charl and I raised on a bottle when its mother died; it followed me everywhere. And at night the silence seems alive and the billions of stars in the black sky are so close, so close . . . they lie trembling in the mirror of the marsh at my feet. . . ."

Her memories prompted her to an unusual display of emotion. She bent over and kissed Arthur on the lips.

"You've been a good husband to me. You've given me everything I ever wanted. You're such a gentle man. . . ."

He was startled at this view of himself.

"A gentle man? No. I'm not. That is, I haven't been."

She looked an enquiry.

"Before I knew you. When I was on the Border . . ."

"Oh, the war," she said dismissively. It had not been part of her world.

He closed his eyes and immediately he was back in that world, a young man again . . .

It was like a scene out of some hell. He and his gabba, his chommie, with four black soldiers and a herdsman tracker, were pounding through a landscape of waist-high blond grass and thorn trees. They were chasing a group of Commie terrs a spotter plane had glimpsed. He was weighed down by a backpack and his semiautomatic. Clumps of grass and branches were threaded through his hatband, his lapels, his belt. The loose sand sucked at his boots and made his calves ache. He was scratched by thorns and pouring sweat under a ferocious sun.

The tracker could follow the trail at a run but when he lost it temporarily and the group had to pause, Arthur could have wept with relief, but didn't.

His gabba shook the sweat out of his eyes and grinned at him.

"You happy in your job?"

"Sodding bloodbudgie got under the net and kept me awake all last night," he excused his exhaustion.

The tracker called and pointed.

"This way."

"You sure?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The tracker patiently pointed out to these blind men the dead leaves scattered with grains of sand, and then the dead leaf that had no sand on it. Then they were running again.

When they caught up with the terrs the enemy turned and fired. They fired back and all hell broke loose. When it was over one of their men had been killed; there was a spread-eagled terr dead in the grass and one still standing, clutching a wounded arm. There'd only been three, and one had slipped successfully away under fire and was never caught.

"What shall we do with this one?" Arthur indicated the wounded man who stood staring at them with hate and fear, his chest heaving.

"Take him back and turn him," his gabba said. "Make him spill the beans about his pals."

But Arthur, his eyes drawn by the blood streaming down the man's arm, was seized with revulsion. The blood seemed so theatrical, orange-red and pulpy, the colour of mixed fruit jam. He wasn't going to have that lot shoved under his nose all the way back to base. He wanted the man out of his sight and to hell with the war.

"Get out of here, you," he yelled at him, gesturing with his rifle.

The man turned away slowly, suspiciously.

"Voetsek!"

The man looked back once and then started to run towards some trees. Arthur, watching him run, suddenly found a strange emotion stirring. Without thinking, he swung up his rifle and shot the terr in the back.

Arthur walked over and looked down at the body. The man was wearing a wrist watch. He bent down and undid the strap, wiped some blood off it, and dropped it in a pocket. He still had the watch, hidden in a drawer in his dresser, though he'd never worn it.

"No prisoners," he grinned at his gabba. Why had his gabba and the other men looked at him so oddly, he wondered. This was war.

That had been years ago.

Now those he had shot at had become part of a new government. It was as if he had been defeated by the ghost of the man he had killed. He did not care to think of it.

He had been told they were enemies, devils; then overnight, it almost seemed, they were ordinary human beings, decent, even respectable.

It just went to show what he had always suspected. There was no real morality, only the expedience of power. In this life the powerful or the cunning did what they pleased, took what they wanted, and made up fairy tales to get the rest of the sheep to accept it.

He opened his eyes and Jennifer was still sitting there, watching him.

"My will's with my lawyer," he reminded her. "There won't be any surprises. I've left a few thousands to my sister in Australia. Lance will get the farm. He's been managing it for years and he's been a loyal employee. Josias gets a pension. But the lion's share goes to you and Charl."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Remember how we met? At Urban's party? In Joeys?" She was changing the subject with her usual tact.

"You made every woman there look like flat beer."

"I picked up a bit of pizzazz at the modeling school."

"Tell me about it! I took one look and said to myself, Arthur, this doll is destiny and you're a goner!"

They smiled into each other's eyes, remembering.

Arthur had suddenly appeared at her shoulder, quietly elbowing her partner aside.

To the man he said, "You've left the lights of your car on, my friend. Better do something about it before the battery's flat."

"Thanks, man."

And off her partner went, very worried. Arthur turned to the girl he had abandoned.

She looked at him, very cool, and said, "It won't take him long to find out that the lights aren't on."

"I can talk fast when there's something I want," Arthur said. "Listen, I have this camping trip arranged. A few days in the Bushveld. You'll enjoy it."

"How can you tell? You don't know me."

"There's a bit of primitive Africa in your eyes. I want to see you in your natural setting."

"I've got Etienne, an old friend, up from my hometown, boarding with me at the moment. I can't walk out on him." A pause. "But maybe Etienne could come along? Bring his own girl?"

"No sweat," Arthur said.

"And then Etienne invited his brother, Lance, and *his* girl. In the end it was quite a party," Arthur reminisced.

"Etienne might be alive today if I hadn't said yes to you," she said sombrely.

"And if he had stayed in Joburg he might have stepped in front of a car," he rapped out impatiently.

"He might have made his name as a photographer if he'd lived. He was a genius with the lens. He could make me look like a Miss World."

"Maybe he had talent, I wouldn't know, but he had no money. You need capital to start out as an artist these days, I'm told. You need capital for everything, and that's a fact."

"He could have talked his way past any material obstacles," Jennifer insisted. "How Etienne could talk! He could always make me laugh, too. When he were kids sometimes I'd have to beg him to stop his nonsense, my stomach was hurting from so much laughing."

Arthur grunted. "His brother never said a word. Probably couldn't get a word in edgeways."

"Lance was always quiet," she agreed.

"I thought he was a real *plaasjapie,* a hick, when we met at the camp. He had those sort of features that are rugged and unrelated and unused, like a bit of veld that's never been cultivated."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She shrugged. "I never noticed, I was so used to him."

"That girl he brought with him, what was her name?"

"Lenore, I think."

"Lenore, that's right. You could see she was gone on him. But he never married her."

"No."

"Never married anyone. D'you think he's gay?"

Jennifer looked amused. "I shouldn't think so. In my opinion he's simply not interested in sex."

He was suddenly very tired. He closed his eyes and memories of the fatal camping trip returned in ghostly pictures in his mind . . .

It was the first day. They had arrived at the campsite under a clump of acacia trees near the river. The tents had been set up, the camp beds organised, a fire started. It was late morning and there was now a lull in the brisk activities. Drinks were served.

Jenny, in shorts and halter top, drank hers while sitting with feline grace on top of an ancient granite outcrop. Arthur thought she looked stunning. Etienne hovered around her with his camera, teasing, affectionate, coaxing and chattering like a whole colony of starlings.

Jennifer laughed. "Are you going to try and pass me off as wildlife to your editors, Et?"

"The wildest life around these parts, honey, and they'd better believe it!"

Another scene stood out in his memory. It occurred after lunch the same day.

Jennifer had snatched Etienne's hat, which he had placed over his face as he lay dreamily in the shade, and she refused to give it back, teasingly holding it just out of reach.

Etienne jumped up, disturbing a clump of grass close at hand, and several small grasshoppers leaped with tiny *tchiks* into the air, describing parabolas of alarm. Etienne scooped up one in his fist and headed purposefully towards Jennifer.

"Etienne! No! Those things give me the creeps."

Lance was sitting on a log drinking coffee and Jennifer darted behind him, holding his broad stolid back like a shield in front of her. But Etienne reached a long arm around and caught her. She gave a loud squeak of outrage as he dropped the grasshopper down the front of her top. Lance wrinkled the corners of his eyes, which, Arthur supposed, was as good as a guffaw from him. And Etienne's girl—what was her name? Dulcie?—held up her beer can in front of her, as if inspecting it for details on how to win a trip to the Seychelles, but her eyes were focussing past the can and the smile on her face looked as if it was being held up by sellotape.

The following day was destined to be their last.

All morning the heat had been oppressive, the steamy air clotted with humidity in which they struggled to breathe, like creatures who had to become amphibious or extinct. Plum-coloured clouds were beginning to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ripen for an afternoon thunderstorm. When they blotted up the sun the air would darken and the veld silently sigh with relief. But meanwhile they sweltered irritably and suddenly felt as if they had had enough of each other's company. Accordingly they split up.

Only Jennifer stayed in camp, making salad for the evening meal from wild herbs Lance had gathered in the veld.

Lance had taken his rifle and had strode out of camp with Lenore, promising to bring back something for the pot.

Etienne had strolled out with his camera to look for some fauna to photograph.

Dulcie had asked Arthur if he could take her to the nearest town to buy a toilet article and he had agreed, but when he was already seated in the Land Rover she had changed her mind and said she would go for a walk instead, did he mind? He didn't really. He thought he might go into town anyway, stock up with more beer, get a newspaper, stop off at a chemist for Dulcie.

As he drew near to the outskirts of the town and the first filling station someone behind the clouds seemed to be blowing on an invisible microphone, making a throaty, burring sound, as if to herald an important announcement.

He drew up outside the local hotel and as he climbed out of the Land Rover a ghost with a flash photographed the town, which was lit up for an instant with an eerie light. A few seconds later the roar of an enraged apocalyptic beast rolled from horizon to horizon. Then the clouds burst, the rain thudded down, spattering in the dust and mauling the trees.

Sipping a double whisky and staring out of the window of the hotel bar, he savoured the cool freshness of the air and the lightening of the atmosphere.

When he got back to camp the rain had vanished, though glittering drops still hung on the miniature white swords of the thorn trees. He found Jennifer supervising a stew made from pieces of a small buck Lance had dropped. Lance was cleaning his rifle, Lenore was washing some clothes in a bucket, and Dulcie was reading a paperback Agatha Christie. She looked up briefly, to thank him for his purchase.

They sat around with their drinks, waiting for Etienne, but after a while the aroma of cooking meat was too much for them and they started supper without him. It was only when the bloodied corpse of the sun had burned itself below the horizon and night had fallen that they first felt the chill of a fear that something bad had happened to Etienne.

The women, their eyes shining huge in the firelight, stayed in camp. Arthur took the flashlight and Lance his gun and they set out together in the direction Etienne had taken, calling his name at intervals. They found nothing and returned to camp to report back to the women.

Then they set out again, this time making a wide circle round the camp. They found no trace of him.

"We'd better report that he's missing," Arthur said grimly.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

For the second time that day he found himself driving into the town. After he had reported to the police he waited while a search party was organised. It took some time, so that it was nearly dawn by the time the group of men started to comb systematically the area in which it was likely that Etienne had been lost or injured.

They had almost reached the boundary of this area when someone spotted the vulture descending. They hurried towards the spot. As they approached, a hyena bounded away, his evil face turned back to stare at them, teeth bared.

They had found Etienne.

In a hushed silence they gathered around the mauled body.

A local farmer stared knowledgeably at the terrible wounds.

"Lion," he said succinctly. "They wander in from the private game reserves sometimes." The farmer trudged stoically back to the dirt road to fetch a blanket from his pickup truck to cover the body.

Someone said, "Heard a roar late afternoon, yesterday. Thought it was the thunder."

Lance said nothing, only stared down at his brother's body, his eyes unreadable.

Arthur stooped behind a bush.

"What's that you've got there?" one of the men called.

"His camera."

"The police will want to have a look at that."

They did, but returned the camera and the developed film to Lance afterwards.

The photo of Jennifer had come out beautifully. So had the last ones on the reel. A group of two lionesses and a blond-maned lion stared into the lens, their eyes golden, cruel, and predatory and rimmed with black. The last photo showed one of the lionesses on her feet, ivory incisors bared from black gums. It must have been the last sight Etienne had ever seen.

Arthur woke to the unearthly howling of the wind. It moaned and murmured like a choir above his bedroom. Ghosts were in the upper airs, restless, unassuaged.

He realized Jennifer was still sitting next to him, quiet as a cat, holding his hand. He could feel the hard hoop of her engagement and wedding ring.

"I've proposed mergers worth millions in my time. But I've never been quite so fraught as when I proposed a merger to you," he told her. "I'd invested so much in the idea, but Etienne's tragedy might have made the market bearish. And then I was older than you . . ."

She shrugged off the difference in years.

"But I knew you loved me," she protested, smiling. "And I knew you had a kind heart. Look what you did for Etienne's brother. You knew his folks were smallholders, struggling, and couldn't do anything for him. You felt sorry for him because his brother died so horribly. So you

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

offered him the job of farm manager. You men never seem to realize how much we women appreciate kindness and gentleness."

"And that influenced you to say yes?" He marveled at the strange ways of women. "I was only looking after number one."

She saw he was embarrassed at being thought soft.

"He turned out to be very good at the job. He's paid me back double anything I ever did for him."

She smiled.

Well, he had seen her, wanted her, determined to get her despite all obstacles, and had done so. But now he acknowledged a feeling of resentment that she had not loved him at the time when he proposed as much as he loved her.

"Of course Etienne was in love with you," he said abruptly.

She said nothing but gave him a look that managed to say clearly, "It's not for me to say it, but it's nothing very unusual for men to fall in love with me."

"Weren't you hoping to marry him?" he probed. "If you were, his careless habit of getting too close to carnivores saved you from a terrible mistake. I can't see you taking to a tacky, scrimping, Bohemian lifestyle while he practised his 'art'! How would you have enjoyed a life of poverty?" he continued. "I saved you from that."

"I wouldn't have enjoyed it at all," she acknowledged tranquilly. "But I didn't want to marry Etienne."

Fretfully he jerked his hand free of hers. "Don't treat me as if I'm a senile fool. I've still got all my wits about me, even though I'm dying."

Perhaps it was because he was dying that he seemed to see things more clearly. He'd believed that after their marriage, if she'd ever loved Etienne, she'd gradually forgotten him, had come to love her husband devotedly.

But what if she had indeed loved Etienne and had never forgotten him? Still loved him, despite her marriage?

The kaleidoscope of his life revolved and the pieces shifted, fell into a different pattern, not a pattern of success, but a pattern of loss.

Wasn't it possible, he speculated bitterly, that his Jenny was not naturally cold as he'd thought. That she was a passionate woman whose love had been held in reserve for a ghost?

He returned to his pain like a tongue worrying a rotten tooth.

"*He* was your first choice, not me," he ventured. "But though woman proposes, a lion disposes, and so you married me. Oh, not for my money, you're not that crude," he forestalled her impatiently as she parted her lips protestingly to speak. "You married me on the rebound, because it didn't matter to you who you married once Etienne was dead."

Words poured out of him now, angrily, as his conviction grew. He made a wild cast, wondering if something would rise up from the depths and take the bait.

"Perhaps you thought you pulled the wool over the eyes of this sheep.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

But I want you to realize, since it doesn't matter anymore, that I know, I've always known about your affair!"

Staring at her, he was reminded of the way a wave which has run up the beach withdraws, taking with it the glaze of bright light that seems to drain from the sand, leaving it lifeless and dead. Just so the vitality and glow swept out of her face like the withdrawing tide and her tanned skin became dun and lifeless.

With a numbing shock he saw that his suspicion was correct, she'd had an affair with Etienne. When, years ago, she'd invited Etienne on their camping trip, he'd suspected Jennifer of being fond of him, suspected him of being his rival. The latter suspicion had turned into certainty when he observed them together. But he hadn't realized things had gone so far between them. No wonder she still cherished his memory.

Everything he had offered her, everything he had given her, it was as if she'd thrown it all back in his face.

He raged with all the impotence of a dying man. How could he strike back at her? Within the humiliated and rejected self, love, in a smooth and effortless transition, turned to hatred.

Wait, there was still a way to show her he was superior to his rival, that he was a man not to be slighted. A way in which his situation, that he would not be alive much longer, became not one of weakness, but of strength. He could feel his life ebbing away, but he could, must, stay conscious long enough to win the game.

"Would you like to know how the love of your life died?" he whispered.

She froze into a terrible stillness, as if she was nothing but an ear and nothing in the world mattered except his voice.

As he spoke he was again driving the Land Rover—and it was like sitting inside a furnace in the heat—along the dirt track that connected eventually with an arterial road and the nearest town.

Something moved out of a clump of thorn trees to his left. It was Etienne. He braked.

"Any luck?" he called.

Etienne approached with his quick light walk. "Not much. I found a group of warthogs, though. Once they get used to me I'll be able to get some saleable shots."

"Warthogs," Arthur repeated scornfully, offering Etienne a cigarette and lighting one himself. "You want to go for the big cats, man. They're the ones people will really pay through the nose to gawk at."

"They've got the killer charisma all right," Etienne agreed with a friendly smile. "But there aren't any around here."

"That's where you're wrong, chommie. I saw one from far off yesterday, silhouetted on that ridge over there. It must have wandered over from one of the private game reserves. I didn't say anything because I didn't want the women panicking and carrying on."

Etienne was intrigued.

"Think you could track it down?"

Arthur shrugged. "Do my darnedest. Hop in."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Arthur drove slowly along the dirt track towards the ridge, scanning the bush with narrowed eyes. He felt pleased with himself for behaving generously towards a rival. He would mention it to Jenny. It might win him kudos.

Some minutes later a sight hit him in the solar plexus.

"There," he breathed, slowing to a halt and switching off the engine.

Not one but three of them. Two lionesses and a lion, lying panting in the shade of some trees.

Etienne wound his window down further and sighted with his camera.

Arthur was incredulous. "You're not going to stay hiding in the Land Rover, are you? Faint heart never won fair photo, my friend."

"Those brutes are dangerous," Etienne murmured. But he was stung by the other man's contempt, and he climbed out cautiously.

"Get closer, for the love of Mike, they won't eat you!" Arthur roared with laughter.

"They look like giant pussycats with teddy-bear ears," Etienne joked, gaining confidence.

Flies were crawling over the somnolent brutal faces, searching out the fragments of decomposing flesh and blood from the last kill. Etienne was exposing film, absorbed, moving closer to the pride. A rank stink of lion saturated the hot and thundery air. It was a fierce and feral odour. When the lion roared, for a second they took it for thunder. Then they saw one of the lionesses hoist herself up, snarl, and begin to walk towards Etienne.

Etienne turned and ran.

Arthur, watching, saw him panic and foresaw what would happen. The running prey would trigger off the instinct to attack.

The lioness charged.

Arthur saw the savage head and the powerful forequarters framed in a whirlwind of dust as she made her heavy, scrambling rush at the man. Still, she was not very fast, perhaps it was the heat, perhaps her heart was not in it, and Arthur saw that Etienne would reach the Land Rover just in time.

As if in a dream, he found his hand moving quickly, inevitably, as if it had a life of its own.

It pressed shut the locks of the doors. It closed the windows.

Afterwards he wondered if Etienne had even fully realised his treachery when he pulled desperately at the locked door, scrabbled at the window. He doubted that any awareness other than the flight and fight for survival could have found room in his consciousness at that moment. Arthur saw the face, unrecognisable in its terror, pass on from the window.

A few seconds later the thudding impact of flesh on flesh, a fountain of dust.

He would not turn round to look, could not. But then did, briefly. And caught a glimpse of the beast crouched with fur reddened up to the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

elbows. To drown out the groans and growls he started up the engine and drove away. He did not look back again.

But whose was that stifled scream? It was Jennifer. She sat rigid in the chair, staring at him with horrified, dilated eyes. Then, hysterically, she scrabbled in her beautifully coiffured hair, bringing it down in wild disorder around her shoulders.

It was strangely cold in the room, Arthur thought. His feet were numb as ice, and it seemed to be getting unaccountably dark. But Arthur lay in bed appeased, triumphant even. Let her hate him when he was gone, she wouldn't be able to overlook him. He reckoned he'd shown her who was bigger and smarter and more of a man, him or Etienne.

"Afterwards . . ." his voice was barely audible, "gave his brother a job to divert any suspicion. But then . . . never could go to that farm as much . . . something about Lance's face . . . he had a look of Etienne . . .

"You can get away with murder if you're clever enough. I've got away with . . . murder . . . all these years. If you've killed once . . . the second time is easy.

"Morality . . . for the weak. The strong . . . take what they want . . . arrange things to suit themselves . . . everyone wants the lion's share.

"I wanted the lion's share. Took it . . . killed competitor . . . Only survival of the fittest . . .

"When I was a boy . . . always believed I was . . . *King* Arthur . . ."

He stopped, choked. Sensing his life was in flight, Death, like a monstrous lioness, had charged down upon him and now crouched on his chest, glaring at him.

He could see her face hovering over his, her wild shock of tawny mane, her amber eyes outlined in black, her reddened nails.

It was Jennifer.

"Etienne was in love with me, but I was never in love with him. It was his brother Lance I loved all along, still love," she said with clear, cruel distinctness.

An earthquake shook his shocked mind. All the structures and facades of his life crumbled.

"Treachery," he groaned. Then, with regained assurance, "At least I still have my son.

"Charl!" he cried, and all his last strength went into that call.

The boy burst into the room, and with him came the tormented triumphant shriek of the wind.

"Dad?" the boy wavered, and the naturally questioning, doubtful tone in his voice seemed to Arthur a truly dreadful thing.

The boy looked down at the man in the bed, the man looked up at the boy.

And before darkness engulfed his mind, Arthur saw that the boy's eyes were the eyes of Lance, while far back in their depths hovered the mocking ghost of Etienne. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

NEXT ISSUE...

Highland Mist
BY MARGARET YORKE

Rat's Castle
BY MICHAEL GILBERT

Crippen, Landru, and Carlos Palomino
BY DOUG ALLYN

Sabotage
BY JAN GLEITER

ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE. Vol. 112, No. 1. Whole No. 682, July 1998. Published monthly except for a combined September/October double issue by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications. 1 year subscription $33.97 in U.S.A. and possessions, $41.97 elsewhere, payable in advance and in U.S. funds (GST included in Canada). Call 800-333-3053 with questions about your subscription. *Subscription orders and mail regarding subscriptions* should be sent to Ellery Queen, P.O. Box 54625, Boulder, CO 80322-4625. Editorial and Executive Offices, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, N.Y. 10020. Periodical postage paid at New York, N.Y. and at additional mailing offices. Canadian postage paid at Windsor, Ontario. *Canada Post International Publications Mail*, Product Sales Agreement No. 260649. © 1997 Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications, all rights reserved. Protection secured under the Universal Copyright Convention and the Pan American Copyright convention. ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE® is the *registered trademark of Ellery Queen. Submissions* must be accompanied by self-addressed stamped envelope. The publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. POSTMASTER: Send Change of Address to Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, P.O. Box 54625, Boulder, CO 80328-4625. In Canada return to 3255 Wyandotte Street East, Windsor, Ontario N8Y 1E9. USPS 523-610, ISSN 1054-8122. Dell GST: R123054108. For back issues, send your check for $5.00 (U.S. funds) to Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, Suite 1500, 251 Main Street, Stamford, CT 06901-2988. Please specify the issue you are ordering. Add $2 per copy for delivery outside the U.S.

PRINTED IN U.S.A.

PRINTED WITH SOY INK

JANET HUTCHINGS
Editor

BRENT BAGWELL
Editorial Assistant

VICTORIA GREEN
Art Director

SHIRLEY CHAN LEVI
Assistant Art Director

CAROLE DIXON
Production Manager

KATHLEEN HALLIGAN
Associate Manager,
Subsidiary Rights & Marketing

BRUCE W. SHERBOW
Director of Newsstand Sales

SANDY MARLOWE
Circulation Services

PETER KANTER
Publisher

ELLERY QUEEN
Editor-in-Chief 1941-1982

ELEANOR SULLIVAN
Editor-in-Chief 1982-1991

ADVERTISING REPRESENTATIVE
DAVID GELLER PUBLISHER'S REP
(212) 682-1540

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

CLASSIFIED MARKETPLACE

Ellery Queen July '98

QUEEN/HITCHCOCK combination CLASSIFIED AD rate is $4.80 per word—payable in advance ($72.00 minimum). Capitalized words 60¢ per word additional. To be included in the next issue, please send order and remittance to Dell Magazines, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10020, Attn: Classified Advertising.

ADDITIONAL INCOME

GET PAID FOR READING BOOKS! Up to $100 each. Send name, address: Calco Publishing (C-212), 22 North Plains, Wallingford, CT 06492

GET PAID $5.00 PER ENVELOPE FROM OUR MAILINGS! $500/up wk. Homeworkers needed to handle our mail in US & Canada. Serious inquiries send SASE to: Homeworkers, 976 W. Morgan Ste. M Rialto, CA 92376.

AUTHORS

AGENT Looking for new authors. Send SASE to: GEM, 4717 Poe Road, Medina, Ohio 44256.

EDITORIAL SERVICES: Award-winning writer offers manuscript critiques and in-depth editing. Edgar nominee. 415-924-0527.

PUBLISH YOUR BOOK NOW! Your book can be produced and promoted by the leading subsidy book publisher. Send for free brochure HP-5, Vantage Press, 516 W. 34th St., New York, NY 10001.

ASTROLOGY

WITCHCRAFT! Harness its power! Free Protective Pentacle. Write: School, PO Box 297AN, Hinton, WV 25951.

BOOKS AND PERIODICALS

FREE CATALOG Collectible and used mystery books. Dunn and Powell Books, Dept. DP, The Hideaway, Bar Harbor, ME 04609-1714, dpbooks@acadia.net/www.dpbooks.com

FREE CATALOGS Collectible/used mysteries. Murder is Served, 5273 Bittersweet Drive, Dayton, OH 45429. 937-438-0211.

FREE LISTS. Quality used paperbacks: mysteries, SF, gothics, westerns. (Please specify.) Steve Lewis, 62 Chestnut, Newington, CT 06111.

MYSTERIES. Firsts. Used, Collectible detective fiction. FREE CATALOG. Norris Books, 2491 San Ramon Valley Blvd., Suite 1-201, San Ramon, CA 94583.

MYSTERY ADDICTS! Free Catalog! New and recycled detective fiction. Grave Matters, Box 32192-C, Cincinnati, OH 45232, 513-242-7527.

SEND FOR FREE catalog of mystery and detective fiction. Canford Books, Drawer 216E, Freeville, NY 13068

MURDER MYSTERY CRUISE

11th annual MURDER MYSTERY CRUISE, March 13, 1999. Seven day cruise to the Southern Caribbean aboard Princess Cruises' magnificent Dawn Princess. Call CruiseWorks 1-800-876-6664.

PATENTING

Apply for a Patent! FREE Information Kit. Call 1-800-846-8368 Ext. 404.

PUBLISHING

NEW AUTHORS
PUBLISH YOUR WORK
ALL SUBJECTS CONSIDERED
Fiction, Biography, Religious, Poetry, Children's
AUTHORS WORLDWIDE INVITED.
WRITE OR SEND YOUR MANUSCRIPT TO
MINERVA PRESS
2 OLD BROMPTON ROAD, LONDON SW7 3DQ, ENGLAND

YOU'LL MAKE MONEY

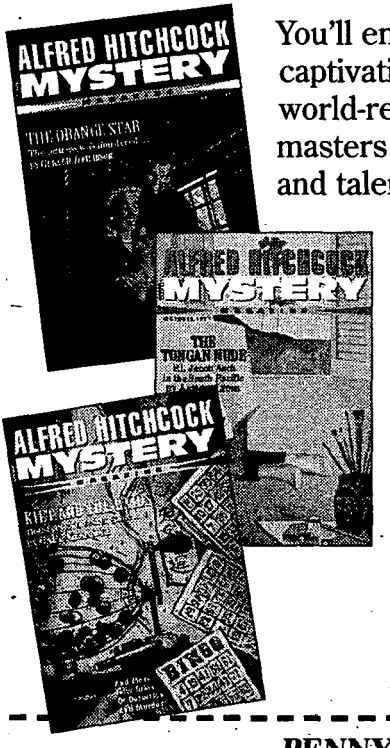
SAVE MONEY TOO by READING and ANSWERING THESE CLASSIFIED ADS

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

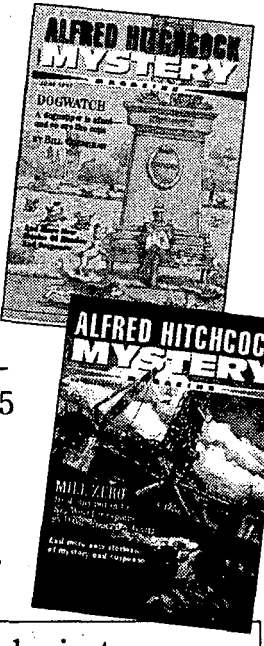
MYSTERY VALUE PACK

5 magazines for just $8.95!

Give yourself **chills** with our value pack of 5 best-loved issues of **Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine!**



You'll enjoy dozens of captivating tales from world-renowned masters of suspense and talented new writers alike — all for just $8.95 plus shipping. **You save 40% off the regular price.**



It's easy to order just fill out the coupon below and mail it to us with your payment. **Your satisfaction is fully guaranteed!**

PENNY MARKETING

Dept. SM-100, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855-1220

☑ **YES!** Send me my **Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine Value Pack** (AHPK05). I get 5 entertaining issues for just $8.95 plus $3 shipping & handling ($11.95 per pack, U.S. funds). My satisfaction is fully guaranteed! My payment of $_____ is enclosed.

Name: _____
(Please print)

Address: _____

City: _____

State: _____ **ZIP:** _____

Please make checks payable to Penny Marketing. Allow 8 weeks for delivery. Magazines are back issues shipped together in one package. To keep prices low we cannot make custom orders. Add $4 additional postage for delivery outside the U.S.A. Offer expires 6/30/99. 068C-NQHVLL

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

PENNY MARKETING

Dept. SM-100, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855-1220

☑ **YES!** Please send me a set of five classic **Alfred Hitchcock Anthologies,** (AHVP05). My payment of $12.95 plus $5 shipping and handling ($17.95 total, U.S. funds) is enclosed.

Name: _____
(Please print)

Address: _____

City: _____

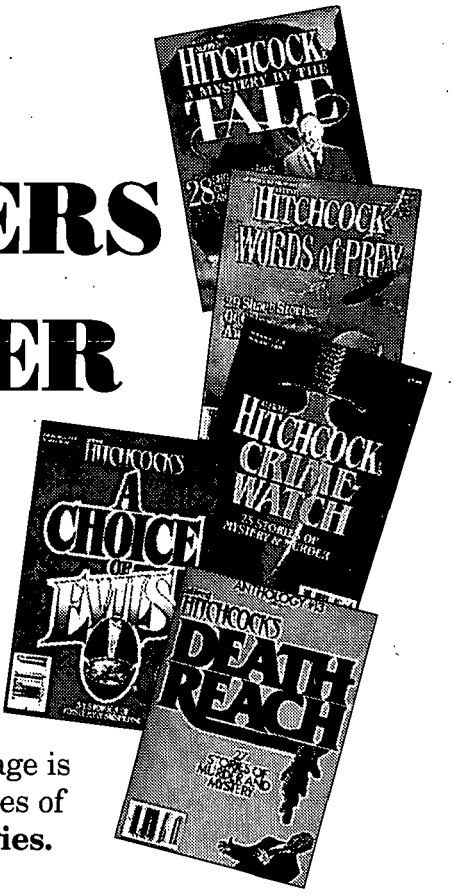
State: _____ **ZIP:** _____

Please make checks payable to Penny Marketing. Allow 8 weeks for delivery. Outside USA: Add an additional $2 shipping & handling ($19.95 per set, U.S. funds). CT Residents: Pay $19.03 per set to include state sales tax. This offer expires 12/31/98.

068-NMHALL

Match Wits with the

MASTERS OF MURDER



The masters of murder have gathered together to bring you spine-tingling tales of mystery and suspense!

They promise to keep you guessing until the very last page is turned with five classic volumes of **Alfred Hitchcock Anthologies.**

Each volume features the very best in murder and mayhem from the past 40 years of Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine. You'll be captivated with more than 140 stories in all for just $12.95!

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

YOURS FREE!

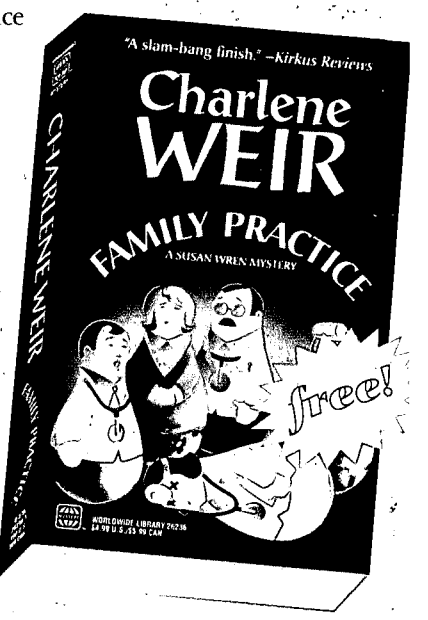
CHARLENE WEIR'S *Family Practice*

If you enjoy fast-paced mystery thrillers, then you'll love **The Mystery Library™!** To introduce you to this superb series, we'd like to send you 3 FREE BOOKS!

Your free books include *Family Practice* by best-selling author Charlene Weir, *The Caravaggio Books* by Bernard Peterson and *Mr. Donaghue Investigates* by Anna Shone.

These three books have a combined cover price of $14.97, but they are yours free! (All you pay is a 99¢ delivery charge. Send no money now; we'll bill you later.) After receiving your books, if you don't wish to get any more, write "cancel" on the statement and return it with your 99¢ payment. **You'll be under no further obligation to buy anything!**

If you do not cancel, about a month later we'll send you 3 more books and bill you just $4.19 each plus 25¢ delivery*. You may return any shipment at our expense and cancel at any time, even after your first shipment. There is no minimum number of books to buy, no hidden extras! So go ahead—accept our special offer and find out how exciting The Mystery Library™ is!



Get 3 mystery novels FREE!

THE MYSTERY LIBRARY™ ®

YES, send me the three books under the terms described above, and bill me just 99¢ for delivery. And please send my free Plum Première Wineglass! I can look forward to receiving additional wineglasses in future shipments. I understand that I am under no obligation to purchase anything else and I may cancel at any time.

415 WBE CGSR

NAME (Please Print)

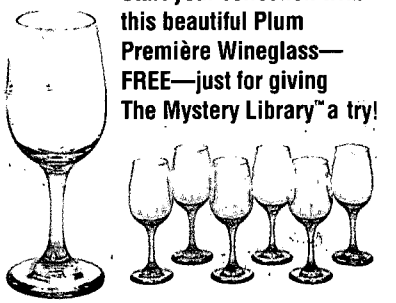
ADDRESS APT#

CITY STATE ZIP

Mail to: THE MYSTERY LIBRARY
P.O. BOX 9017 • BUFFALO, NY 14240-9017

SPECIAL FREE GIFT!

Start your collection with this beautiful Plum Première Wineglass—FREE—just for giving The Mystery Library™ a try!



*Terms and prices subject to change without notice. Sale tax applicable in N.Y. All orders subject to approval. Offe limited to one per household. Offer only available in th U.S. "THE MYSTERY LIBRARY" and Globe Design ar trademarks of Harlequin Enterprises Limited.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED